

# THE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH PERIOD (1500–1800)

CHAPTER

7



## Society, Spellings, and Sounds

The early Modern period was transformative for both England and the language. The sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were a time of revolutionary development, opening the way for English to become a world language.

### SOME KEY EVENTS IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

The following events during the early Modern English period significantly influenced the development of the English language.

- 1534 The Act of Supremacy established Henry VIII as “Supreme Head of the Church of England,” and thus officially put civil authority above Church authority in England.
- 1549 The *Book of Common Prayer* was adopted and became an influence on English literary style.
- 1558 At the age of 25, Elizabeth I became queen of England and, as a woman with a Renaissance education and a skill for leadership, began a forty-five-year reign that promoted statecraft, literature, science, exploration, and commerce.
- 1577–80 Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe, the first Englishman to do so, and participated in the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, thus removing an obstacle to English expansion overseas.
- 1590–1611 William Shakespeare wrote the bulk of his plays, from *Henry VI* to *The Tempest*.
- 1600 The East India Company was chartered to promote trade with Asia, leading eventually to the establishment of the British Raj in India.
- 1604 Robert Cawdrey published the first English dictionary, *A Table Alphabeticall*.

- 1607 Jamestown, Virginia, was established as the first permanent English settlement in America.
- 1611 The Authorized or King James Version of the Bible was produced by a committee of scholars and became, with the Prayer Book and the works of Shakespeare, a major influence on English literary style.
- 1619 The first African slaves in North America arrived in Virginia.
- 1642–48 The Puritan Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a military dictatorship, which lasted until the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660.
- 1660 The Royal Society was founded as the first English organization devoted to the promotion of scientific knowledge and research.
- 1670 Hudson's Bay Company was chartered for promoting trade and settlement in Canada.
- 1688 The Glorious Revolution was a bloodless coup in which Parliament invited William of Orange and his wife, Mary (daughter of the reigning English king), to assume the English throne, resulting in the establishment of Parliament's power over that of the monarchy.
- 1702 The first daily newspaper was published in London, resulting in the expanding power of the press to disseminate information and to form public opinion.
- 1719 Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe*, sometimes identified as the first modern novel in English.
- 1755 Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*.
- 1775–83 The American Revolution resulted in the foundation of the first independent nation of English speakers outside the British Isles.
- 1788 The English first settled Australia near modern Sydney.

## THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE TO MODERN ENGLISH

Despite vast changes in vocabulary and pronunciation, English speakers of the sixteenth century were unaware that they were leaving the Middle English period and entering the Modern. All such divisions between stages of the language's development are to some extent arbitrary, even though they are based on clear and significant internal changes in the language and also correlate with external events in the community of speakers.

### EXPANSION OF THE ENGLISH VOCABULARY

The word stock of English was expanded greatly during the early Modern period in three ways. As literacy increased, a conscious need was felt to improve and amplify the vocabulary. As English speakers traveled abroad, they encountered new things that they needed new words to talk about. And as they traveled, they increasingly met speakers of other languages from whom they borrowed words.

During the Renaissance, an influx of Latin and Greek words (Chapter 12, 251–2) was associated with a vogue for **inkhorn terms**, so named from the fact that they were seldom spoken but mainly written (with a pen dipped into an ink container made of horn). The influence of the Classical languages has remained strong ever since. French

also continued to be a major source of loanwords into English (256–7), as it has been from the time of the Norman Conquest until today. In addition, Spanish and Portuguese (258–9) became significant sources for new words, especially as a result of colonial expansion in Latin America.

Many other languages contributed to the English vocabulary throughout the period. Celtic (252–3) and Scandinavian (253–4) continued their influence, but new impulses came from Italian (259) and German—both Low and High (260–2), including Yiddish (262). More far-flung influences were from the languages of Asia, Australasia, Africa, eastern Europe, Asia Minor, and the Americas (263–6).

Quite early in their history, the American colonies began to influence the general vocabulary with loanwords from the languages of both Amerindians and other European settlers in the New World. American colonists also changed the use of native English words and exported those changes, sometimes under protest, back to Britain. The first documented use of the word *lengthy* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is by John Adams in his diary for January 3, 1759: “I grow too minute and lengthy.” Early British reactions to this perceived Americanism are typified by a 1793 censorious judgment in the *British Critic*: “We shall, at all times, with pleasure, receive from our transatlantic brethren real improvements of our common mother-tongue: but we shall hardly be induced to admit such phrases as ... ‘more lengthy’, for longer, or more diffuse.”

#### INNOVATION OF PRONUNCIATION AND CONSERVATION OF SPELLING

The fifteenth century, following the death of Chaucer, marked a turning point in the internal history of English, especially its pronunciation and spelling, for during this period the language underwent greater, more important phonological changes than in any other century before or since. Despite these radical changes in pronunciation, the old spelling was generally kept. William Caxton, who died in 1491, and the printers who followed him based their spellings, not on the pronunciation current in their day, but instead on late medieval manuscripts. Hence, although the quality of all the Middle English long vowels had changed, their spelling continued as it had been at earlier times. For instance, the Middle English [e:] of *feet*, *see*, *three*, etc. had been raised to [i:], but all such words went on being written as if no change had taken place. Consequently, the phonological value of many letters of the English alphabet changed drastically.

Printers and men of learning—misguided though they frequently were—greatly influenced English spelling. Learned men preferred archaic spellings, and they created some by respelling words etymologically. Printers also helped by normalizing older scribal practices. Although early printed works exhibit a good many inconsistencies, still they are quite orderly compared with the everyday manuscript writing of the time.

#### THE ORTHOGRAPHY OF EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

The spelling conventions of early Modern English were distinctive in a number of ways.

In a few words, notably *the* and *thee*, early printed books sometimes used *y* to represent the sounds usually spelled *th*. This substitution was made because the letter *þ* was still much used in English manuscripts, but the early printers got their type fonts from the Continent, where the letter *þ* was not normal. So they substituted for *þ* the closest thing they found in the foreign fonts, namely *y*. Thus *the* and *thee* were both sometimes printed as *y<sup>e</sup>*. The plural pronoun meaning ‘you all,’ on the other hand, was written *ye*. When the *e* was above the line, the *y* was always a makeshift for *þ* and never represented [y].

Writing letters superscript, especially the final letter of a word, was a device to indicate abbreviation, much as we use a period. This convention lasted right through the nineteenth century, for example, in *M<sup>r</sup>* for *Mr.* or *Gen<sup>l</sup>* for *General*. The abbreviation *y<sup>t</sup>* stands for *that*. The form *y<sup>e</sup>* for *the* survives to our own day in such pseudo-antique absurdities as “Ye Olde Choppe Suey Shoppe,” in which it is usually pronounced as if it were the same word as the old pronoun *ye*. Needless to say, there is no justification whatever for such a pronunciation.

The present use of *i* for a vowel and *j* for a consonant was not established until the seventeenth century. In the King James Bible (1611) and the First Folio (1623) of Shakespeare, *i* is used for both values; see, for instance, the passage from the First Folio at the end of this chapter, in which Falstaff’s first name is spelled *lack*. Even after the distinction in writing was made, the feeling persisted for a long time that *i* and *j* were one and the same letter. Dr. Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) puts them together alphabetically, and this practice continued well into the nineteenth century.

It was similar with the curved and angular forms of *u*—that is, *u* and *v*—they too were originally used more or less indiscriminately for either vowel or consonant. For example, an older text will have *iaspre*, *liue*, and *vnder*, for which a present-day edition may substitute *jaspre* ‘jasper,’ *live*, and *under*, with *j* and *v* for *i* and *u* when they indicate consonants, and *u* for initial *v* when it indicates a vowel. By the middle of the seventeenth century, most English printers were making the same distinctions. The matter was purely graphic; no question of pronunciation was involved in the substitution. Yet as with *i* and *j*, catalogues and indexes put *u* and *v* together well into the nineteenth century. So in dictionaries *vizier* was followed by *ulcer*, *unzoned* by *vocable*, and *iambic* was set between *jamb* and *jangle*.

The sound indicated by *h* had been lost in late Latin, and hence the letter has no phonetic significance in those Latin-derived languages that retain it in their spelling. The influence of Classical Latin had caused French scribes to restore the *h* in the spelling of many words—for instance, *habit*, *herbage*, and *homme*—though it was never pronounced. It was also sometimes inserted in English words of French origin where it was not etymological—for instance, *habundance* (mistakenly regarded as coming from *habere* ‘to have’) and *abominable* (supposed to be from Latin *ab* plus *homine*, explained as ‘away from humanity, hence bestial’). When Shakespeare’s pedant Holofernes by implication recommended this latter misspelling and consequent mispronunciation with [h] in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (“This is abominable, which he would call abbominable”), he was in very good company, at least as far as the writing of the word is concerned, for the error had been current since Middle English times. Writers of Medieval Latin and Old French had been similarly misled by a false notion of the etymology of the word.

During the Renaissance, *h* was inserted after *t* in a number of foreign words—for instance, *throne*, from Old French *trone*, which came into English with an

initial [t] sound. The French word is from Latin *thronus*, borrowed from Greek, *th* being the normal Roman transliteration of Greek *θ*. The English respelling ultimately gave rise to a spelling pronunciation with [θ], as also in *theater* and *thesis*, which earlier had initial [t] as well. It was similar with the sound spelled *th* in *anthem*, *apothecary*, *Catherine* (the pet forms *Kate* and *Kit* preserve the older sound), and *Anthony* (compare *Tony*), which to a large extent has retained its historically expected pronunciation in British English. The only American pronunciation of *Anthony* is with [θ]. It is sometimes heard even in reference to Mark Antony, where the spelling does not encourage it. The *h* of *author*, from Old French *autor* (modern *auteur*), going back to Latin *auctor*, was first inserted by French scribes, to whom an *h* after *t* indicated no difference in pronunciation. When in the sixteenth century this fancy spelling began to be used in the English loanword, the way was paved for the modern pronunciation, historically a mispronunciation.

Other Renaissance respellings also effected changes in traditional pronunciations. An example is *schedule*, originally *cedule* from Old French. Its historically expected pronunciation would begin with [s], but the *sch*-spelling, a sixteenth-century innovation, changed that. Noah Webster recommended the American spelling pronunciation with initial [sk], as if the word were a Greek loan. The present-day British pronunciation of the first sound as [ʃ] is also historically an error.

*Debt* and *doubt* are fancy **etymological respellings** of *det* and *dout* (both Middle English from Old French), the *b* having been inserted because it was perceived that these words were ultimately derivatives of Latin *debitum* and *dubitare*, respectively. The *c* in *indict* and the *b* in *subtle* are similar. The learned men responsible for such respellings were followed by pedants like Shakespeare's Holofernes, who complains of those "rackers of ortagraphe [orthography]" who say *dout* and *det* when they should say *doubt* and *debt*. "*D, e, b, t*, not *d, e, t*," he says, unaware that the word was indeed written *d, e, t* before schoolmasters like himself began tinkering with spelling.

*Rhyme* and *rhythm* are twin etymological respellings. English had borrowed *rime* from Old French about the year 1200, but in the sixteenth century scholars began to spell the word also as *rythme* or *rhythm* and then a bit later as *rhyme*. These respellings reflected the origin of the French word in Latin *rithmus* or *rhythmus*, ultimately from Greek *rhythmos*. The *th* in the *rhythm* spelling came to be pronounced, and that form has survived as a separate word with the distinct meaning of 'cadence.' For the meaning 'repetition of sound,' the older *rime* spelling, which has continued alongside the fancy upstart *rhyme*, is better both historically and orthographically, and so is used in this book. Both are in standard use.

*Comptroller* is a pseudolearned respelling of *controller*, taken by English from Old French. The fancy spelling is doubtless due to an erroneous association with French *compte* 'count.' The word has fairly recently acquired a new pronunciation based on the misspelling. *Receipt* and *indict*, both taken from Anglo-French, and *victual*, from Old French, have been similarly remodeled to give them a Latin look; their traditional pronunciations have not as yet been affected, although a spelling pronunciation for the last is possible by those who do not realize that it is the same word as that spelled in the plural form *vittles*. *Parliament*, a respelling of the earlier *parlement* (a French loanword derived from the verb *parler* 'to speak'), has also fairly recently acquired a pronunciation such as the later spelling seems to indicate.

Another such change of long standing has resulted from the insertion of *l* in *fault* (ME *faute*, from Old French), a spelling suggested by Vulgar Latin *fallita* and strengthened by the analogy of *false*, which has come to us direct from Latin *falsus*.

For a while the word continued to be pronounced without the *l*, riming with *ought* and *thought* in seventeenth-century poetry. In Dr. Johnson’s day there was wavering between the older *l*-less and the newer pronunciation with *l*, as Johnson himself testifies in the *Dictionary*. The eighteenth-century **orthoepists** indicated the same wavering. They were men who conceived of themselves as exercising a directive function; they recommended and condemned, usually on quite irrelevant grounds. Seldom were they content merely to record variant pronunciations. Thomas Sheridan, the distinguished father of a more distinguished son named Richard Brinsley, in his *General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780) decides in favor of the *l*-less pronunciation of *fault*, as does James Elphinston in his *Propriety Ascertained* (1787). Robert Nares in his *Elements of Orthoëpy* (1784) records both pronunciations and makes no attempt to make a choice between them. John Walker in his *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791) declared that to omit the *l* made a “disgraceful exception,” for the word would thus “desert its relation to the Latin *falsitas*.” The history of the *l* of *vault* is quite similar.

Although such tinkering with the orthography is one cause of the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation in Modern English, another and more important one is the change in the pronunciation of the tense vowels that helps to demark Middle from Modern English. This change, the most salient of all phonological developments in the history of English, is called the **Great Vowel Shift**.

THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

A comparison of the modern developments in parentheses in the chapter on Old English (87) shows clearly the modern representatives of the Old English long vowels. As has been pointed out, the latter changed only slightly in Middle English: [a:], in Old English written *a*, as in *stān*, was rounded except in the Northern dialect to [ɔ:], in Middle English written *o(o)*, as in *stoon*. But this was really the only noteworthy change in quality. By the early Modern English period, however, all the long vowels had shifted: Middle English *ē*, as in *sweete* ‘sweet,’ had already acquired the value [i] that it currently has, and the others were well on their way to acquiring the values that they have in current English. The changes in the long vowels are summarized in the following table:

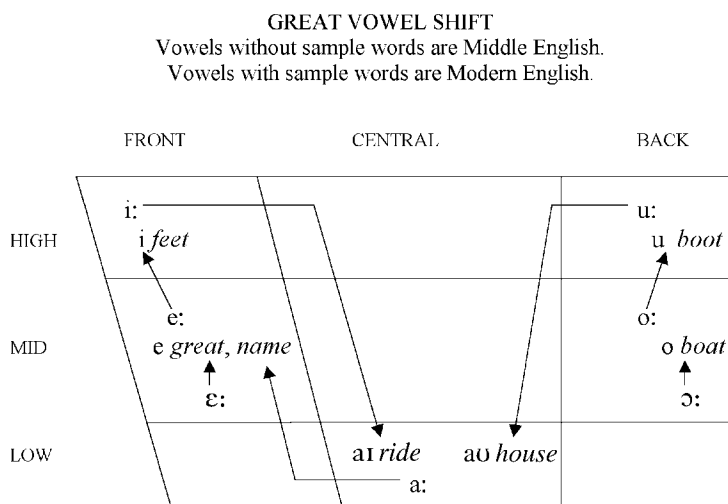
LONG VOWELS

Late Middle English		Early Modern English		Later English	
[a:] name	—————→	[æ:]	—————→	[ɛ:]	—————→ [e] name
[e:] feet	—————→	[i]	—————→		feet
[ɛ:] greet	—————→	[e]	—————→		great
[i:] ride	—————→	[əɪ]	—————→	[aɪ]	ride
[o:] boote	—————→	[u]	—————→		boot
[ɔ:] boot	—————→	[o]	—————→		boat
[u:] hous	—————→	[əʊ]	—————→	[aʊ]	house

In phonological terms:

1. The Middle English high vowels [i:] and [u:] were diphthongized, and then the vowels were centralized and lowered in two steps, first to [əi] and [əu], then to [aɪ] and [aʊ].
2. Each of the Middle English mid vowels was raised one step—higher mid [e:] and [o:] to [i] and [u], respectively, and then lower mid [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] to [e] and [o], respectively.
3. The low vowel [a:] was fronted to [æ:] and then raised in two steps through [ɛ:] to [e].

In early Modern English, vowel quality generally became more important than quantity, so length is shown with early Modern vowels only for [æ:] and [ɛ:], which alone were distinguished from short vowels primarily by length. The beginning and ending points of the shift can also be displayed diagrammatically as in the accompanying chart.



The stages by which the shift occurred and the cause of it are unknown. There are several theories, but as the evidence is ambiguous, they are best left to more specialized study. By some series of intermediate changes, long *i*, as in Middle English *rīden* ‘to ride,’ became a diphthong [əi]. This pronunciation survives in certain types of speech, particularly before voiceless consonants. It went on in most types of English to become in the course of the seventeenth century [aɪ], though there are variations in pronunciation.

It was similar with Middle English long *ū*, as in *hous* ‘house’: it became [əu]. This [əu], surviving in eastern Virginia and in some types of Canadian English, became [aʊ] at about the same time as [əi] became [aɪ].

Middle English [o:], as in *ro(o)te* ‘root,’ became [u]. Laxing of this [u] to [ʊ] has occurred in *book, foot, good, look, took*, and other words; in *blood* and *flood* there has also been unrounding, resulting in [ɔ] in these two words. The chronology of this subsequent laxing and unrounding is difficult to establish, as is the distribution of the

various developments. As Helge Kökeritz (*Shakespeare's Pronunciation* 236) points out, Shakespeare's riming of words that had Middle English long close *ō* gives no clue to his pronunciation, for he rimes *food* with *good* and *flood*, *mood* with *blood*, *reprove* with *love* and *dove*. If these are not merely traditional rimes, we must conclude that the distribution of [u], [ʊ], and [ə] was not in early Modern English the same as it is in current English, and there is indeed ample evidence that colloquial English did vacillate a good deal. This fact is not particularly surprising when we remember that there is at the present time a certain amount of wavering between [u] and [ʊ] in such words as *roof*, *broom*, *room*, *root*, and a few others.

The development of Middle English [ɔ:] is straightforwardly to [o] as in Modern English *home* and *stone*. However, in a few words this [ɔ:] was laxed perhaps before the Great Vowel Shift could affect it—for instance, in *hot*, from Middle English *hō(q)t*.

Middle English *ā* as in *name* and *ai* as in *nail* had by the early fifteenth century been leveled as [a:] and thus were affected alike by the Great Vowel Shift. The resultant homophony of *tale* and *tail* provided Shakespeare and his contemporaries with what seems to have been an almost irresistible temptation to make off-color puns (for instance, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2.3.52ff and *Othello* 3.1.6ff). The current pronunciation of such words—that is, with [e]—became normal in standard English probably by the early years of the eighteenth century. All these pronunciations may have existed side by side, however, just as **retarded** and **advanced pronunciations** coexist in current English.

The development of Middle English [e:] to Modern English [i] as in *three* and *kene* 'keen' is quite regular.

The development of Middle English [ɛ:], as in *heȝth* 'heath' and other such words, however, is complex. It has two results in early Modern English because of a change that seems to have occurred in late Middle English before the Great Vowel Shift operated. According to the Great Vowel Shift [ɛ:] becomes [e]; and that change is illustrated by Falstaff's *raisin-reason* pun of 1598, in the passage cited at the end of this chapter, and many other such puns—for example, *abased—a beast*, *grace-grease*. (The fullest treatment of Shakespeare's puns—sometimes childish, but frequently richly obscene—is in Part 2 of Kökeritz's *Shakespeare's Pronunciation*.)

But there is also convincing evidence that in late Middle English times, before the Great Vowel Shift occurred, the vowel [ɛ:] also came to exist as a dialect variant in words like *heath*, *beast*, and *grease*. Its precise history is unknown, but it may have developed as a pre-Great Vowel Shift raising in some variety of Middle English. So in late Middle English times, the *heath*, *beast*, and *grease* words could be pronounced in either of two ways—with [ɛ:] or with [e:]. Chaucer sometimes rimes historically close *e* words with words that ordinarily had open *e* in his type of English, indicating his familiarity with such a pre-1400 raising of [ɛ:] to [e:].

When the Great Vowel Shift occurred, it raised [ɛ:] to [e] and also [e:] to [i] in both ways of pronouncing the *heath*, *beast*, and *grease* words. So in early Modern English those words also had two pronunciations, with either [e] (mainly by fashionable people) or with [i] by the less fashionable. And that social difference lasted until the eighteenth century. But fashions change. And during the eighteenth century, the unfashionable pronunciation of the *heath*, *beast*, and *grease* words with [i] became fashionable, except in a few old-fashioned holdouts: *break*, *great*, *steak*, and *yea*. The present [i] vowel in such words as *heath*, *beast*, and *grease* is thus obviously, as H. C. Wyld (211) puts it, "merely the result of the abandonment of one type of pronunciation and the adoption of



another.” Other authorities agree with Wyld’s view—for instance, Kökeritz (*Shakespeare’s Pronunciation* 194–209) and E. J. Dobson (2:606–16).

Before that change in fashion, many rimes from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries testify to the [e] pronunciation in words that today have [i] instead—for instance, Jonathan Swift’s “You’d swear that so divine a creature / Felt no necessities of nature” (“Strephon and Chloe”), in which the riming words are to be pronounced [kretər] and [netər], and “You spoke a word began with H. / And I know whom you meant to teach” (“The Journal of a Modern Lady”), in which the riming words are [eč] and [teč].

The formerly standard and fashionable pronunciation with [e] survives today only in the handful of words mentioned above (*break*, *great*, *steak*, and *yea*) and in some dialects, such as Irish. A few surnames borne by families long associated with Ireland, like *Yeats* (compare *Keats*), *Re(a)gan*, and *Shea*, have also retained the pronunciation with [e], as does *Beatty* in American speech.

As Dobson (2:611) points out, “Throughout the [early] ModE period there was a struggle going on between two ways of pronouncing ‘ME ē words’”; ultimately the [i] pronunciation was to win out, so that only a few words remain as evidence of the [e] sound that prevailed in fashionable circles from about 1600 until the mid-eighteenth century. This process was gradual, as the fashion spread from one word to another.

## OTHER VOWELS

### STRESSED SHORT VOWELS

The stressed short vowels have remained relatively stable throughout the history of English. The most obvious changes affect Middle English short *a*, which shifted by way of [a] to [æ], and Middle English short *u*, which was unrounded and shifted to [ɔ], though its older value survives in a good many words in which the vowel was preceded by a labial consonant, especially if it was followed by *l*—for instance, *bull*, *full*, *pull*, *bush*, *push*, and *put* (but compare the variant *putt*).

It is evident that there was an unrounded variant of short *o*, reflected in spellings of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Wyld (240–1) cites a number of examples of *a* for *o* in spellings, including Queen Elizabeth I’s “I pray you stap the mouthes.” This unrounding did not affect the language as a whole, but such doublets as *stop*–*strap* and *god*–*gad* remain to testify to its having occurred. Today [ɑ] is the typical American vowel of most words that had short [ɔ] in Middle English (*god*, *stop*, *clock*, and so forth). Short *e* has not changed, except occasionally before [ŋ], as in *string* and *wing* from Middle English *streng* and *wenge*, and short *i* remains what it has been since Germanic times.

### SHORT VOWELS

Late Middle English	Early Modern English	Later English
[a] that	→ [æ]	→
[ɛ] bed	→	→
[ɪ] in	→	→
[ɔ] on, odd	→	→ [ɔ] or [ɑ]
[ʊ] but	→ [ɔ]	→

DIPHTHONGS

The Middle English diphthongs had a tendency to monophthongize. For example, [au] in *lawe* and [ɔʊ] in *snow* were monophthongized to [ɔ] and [o], respectively. The early fifteenth-century merger of [æɪ] in *nail* with [a:] as in *name* has already been mentioned; the subsequent history of that diphthong was the same as that of the long vowel with which it merged.

The Middle English diphthongs [ɛʊ] and [ɪʊ], written *eu*, *ew*, *iu*, *iw*, and *u* (depending to some extent on when they were written), merged into [yu]. As we saw in Chapter 2, this [yu] has tended to be reduced to [u] in such words as *duty*, *Tuesday*, *lute*, and *stews*, in which it follows an alveolar sound. The [y] has been retained at the beginning of a word (*use* as distinct from *ooze*) and after labials and velars: *b* (*beauty* as distinct from *booty*), *p* (*pew* as distinct from *pooh*), *m* (*mute* as distinct from *moot*), *v* (*view* as distinct from the first syllable of *voodoo*), *f* (*feud* as distinct from *food*), *g* (the second syllable of *argue* as distinct from *goo*), *k* (often spelled *c* as in *cute* as distinct from *coot*), and *h* (*hew* as distinct from *who*). After [z], this [y] ultimately gave rise by mutual assimilation to a new single sound [ʒ] in *azure*, *pleasure*, and the like. Similarly, the earlier medial or initial [sy] in *pressure*, *nation*, *sure*, and the like has become [ʃ], though this was not a new sound, having occurred under other circumstances in Old English.

The Middle English diphthong [ɔɪ], occurring almost exclusively in words of French origin, such as *poison*, *join*, and *boil*, was written *oi* rather than *ui* because of the substitution of *o* for *u* next to stroke letters, in this case *i* (Chapter 6, 118). The first element of this diphthong shifted to [ə] along with other short *u*'s. The diphthong thus fell together with the development of Middle English *ī* as [əɪ], both subsequently becoming [aɪ]. So the verb *boil*, from Old French *boillir* (ultimately Lat. *bullire*) became current nonstandard [baɪl]. Many rimes in our older poetry testify to this identity in pronunciation of the reflexes of Middle English *ī* and *ui*—for instance, Alexander Pope's couplet "While expletives their feeble aid do join; / And ten low words oft creep in one dull line." The current standard pronunciation of words spelled with *oi* for etymological *ui* is based on the spelling. Some dialects, however, preserve the pronunciation with [aɪ] (Kurath and McDavid 167–8, maps 143–6).

The quite different Middle English diphthong spelled *oi* and pronounced [ɔɪ] is also of French origin, going back to Latin *au*, as in *joie* (ultimately Lat. *gaudia*) and *cloistre* (Lat. *claustrum*). It has not changed significantly since its introduction.

DIPHTHONGS

Late Middle English	Early Modern English	Later English
[au] lawe	→ [ɔ]	→
[ɔʊ] snow	→ [o]	→
[æɪ] nail	→ [a:] → [æ:]	→ [ɛ:] → [e]
[ɛʊ], [ɪʊ] fewe, knew	→ [yu]	→
[ɔɪ] join	→ [əɪ] → [aɪ]	→ [ɔɪ]
[ɔɪ] joy	→	→

## QUANTITATIVE VOWEL CHANGES

Quantitative changes in the Modern English period include the lengthening of an originally short vowel before voiceless fricatives—of [æ] as in *staff*, *glass*, and *path* to [æ:], which in the late eighteenth century was replaced by [ɑ] in standard British English; most forms of American English, however, keep the unlengthened [æ]. Similarly, short *o* was lengthened in *soft*, *lost*, and *cloth*; that lengthened vowel survives in American English as [ɔ], compared with the [ɑ] of *sot*, *lot*, and *clot*, which comes directly from an earlier short *o* without lengthening. Short [ɔ] also lengthened before [g], as in *dog*, compared with *dock*. In *dog* versus *dock* the lengthening has resulted in a qualitatively distinct vowel in most varieties of American English, [ɔ] versus [ɑ]. The earlier laxing of [u] to [ʊ] in words such as *hood* and *good* has already been referred to in connection with the development of Middle English [o:] in the Great Vowel Shift. In *mother*, *brother*, *other*, and *smother*, originally long vowels were shortened (with eventual modification to [ɔ]). *Father* and (in some types of speech) *rather*, with originally short vowels, have undergone lengthening, for what reason we cannot be sure—quite contrary to the shortening that occurred in *lather* and *gather*.

## EARLY MODERN ENGLISH CONSONANTS

The consonants of English, like the short vowels, have been rather stable, though certain losses have occurred within the Modern English period.

The Old English and Middle English voiceless palatal fricative [ç], occurring next to front vowels and still represented in our spelling by *gh*, disappeared entirely, as in *bright*, *sigh*, and *weigh*. The identically written voiceless velar fricative [x], occurring next to back vowels, either disappeared, as in *taught*, *bought*, and *bough*, or became [f], as in *cough*, *laugh*, and *enough*. These changes occurred as early as the fifteenth century in England south of the Humber, though there is evidence that still in the later part of the sixteenth century old-fashioned speakers and a few pedants retained the sounds or at least thought that they ought to be retained (Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* 306).

In the final sequence *-mb*, the *b* had disappeared in pronunciation before the beginning of the Modern English period, so the letter *b* could be added after final *m* where it did not etymologically belong, in *limb*. There was a similar tendency to reduce final *-nd*, as in *lawn*, from Middle English *laund*; confusion seems to have arisen, however, because a nonetymological *-d* has been added in *sound* and *lend* (ME *soun* and *lene*), though in the latter word the excrescent *d* occurred long before the Modern English period.

The *l* of the Middle English preconsonantal *al* was lost after first becoming a vowel: thus Middle English *al* and *au* fell together as *au*, ultimately becoming [ɔ] (as in *talk*, *walk*) or [æ] before *f* and *v* (as in *half*, *salve*) or [ɑ] before *m* (as in *calm*, *palm*). The *l* retained in the spelling of these words has led to spelling pronunciations, particularly when it occurs before *m*; many speakers now pronounce the *l* in words like *calm* and *palm*. The *l* of *ol* was similarly lost before certain consonants by vocalization, as in *folk*, *yolk*, *Holmes*, and the like.

A number of postvocalic *l*'s in English spelling were added because the ultimate Latin sources of their words had an *l*, although it had disappeared in French, from

which the words were borrowed; ultimately those added *l*'s came to be pronounced from the new spellings. The *l* in the spelling of *falcon* was thus restored from the Latin etymon (ME *faucion*, from Old French, in which the vocalization to [u] also occurred). A football team known as the *Falcons* is everywhere called [fælkənz], a pronunciation widely current for the bird long before the appearance of the team. The spelling has as yet had little if any effect on the pronunciation of the name of the writer William Faulkner. Perhaps if the name had been written *Falconer*, which amounts to the same thing, the spelling pronunciation might in time have come to prevail. As noted above, the *l* in *fault* and *vault* was also inserted. The older pronunciation of the first of these words is indicated by Swift's "O, let him not debase your thoughts, / Or name him but to tell his faults" ("Directions for Making a Birth-Day Song").

In French loanwords like *host* and *humble* the *h*, because it is in the spelling, has gradually come to be pronounced in all but a few words; it was generally lacking in such words in early Modern English. In *herb*, the *h* remains silent for many American speakers, but is pronounced by others, and by British speakers generally. In other words, such as *hour*, the *h* is silent in all varieties of English.

There was an early loss of [r] before sibilants, not to be confused with the much later loss (not really normal before the nineteenth century) before any consonant or before a pause: older *barse* 'a type of fish' by such loss became *bass*, as *arse* became *ass*, and *bust*, *nuss*, *fust* developed from *burst*, *nurse*, *first*; this was not, however, a widespread change. An early loss of [r] before *l* is indicated by *palsy* (ME *parlesie*, a variant of *paralisie* 'paralysis').

The final unstressed syllable *-ure* was pronounced [ər], with preceding *t*, *d*, and *s* having the values [t], [d], and [s] or intervocally [z], as in *nature* [-tər], *verdure* [-dər], *censure* [-sər], and *leisure* [-zər], until the nineteenth century. Though Noah Webster's use of such pronunciations was considered rustic and old-fashioned by his more elegant contemporaries, in his *Elementary Spelling Book* of 1843 he gave *gesture* and *jester* as homophones. The older pronunciation is indicated by many rimes: to cite Dean Swift once more, "If this to clouds and stars will venture, / That creeps as far to reach the centre" ("Verses on Two Celebrated Modern Poets"). Webster was also opposed to [-č-] in *fortune*, *virtue*, and the like, which he seems to have associated with fast living. He preferred [-t-] in such words. But many of the pronunciations that he prescribed were scorned by all of the proper Bostonians of his day.

The initial consonant sequences *gn* and *kn*, still represented in our spelling of *gnarl*, *gnat*, *gnaw*, *knave*, *knead*, *knee*, and a few other words, had lost their first elements by the early seventeenth century. Loss of [k] is evidenced by the Shakespearean puns *knack-neck*, *knight-night*, and others cited by Kökeritz (*Shakespeare's Pronunciation* 305).

Final *-ing* when unstressed, as in verb forms like *walking* or *coming* and in pronouns like *nothing* and *something*, had long been practically universally pronounced [-ɪn]. According to Wyld (289), "This habit obtains in practically all Regional dialects of the South and South Midlands, and among large sections of speakers of Received Standard English." The velarization of the *n* to [ŋ] began as a **hypercorrect pronunciation** in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and, still according to Wyld, "has now a vogue among the educated at least as wide as the

more conservative one with *-n*.” Long before Wyld wrote these words, which would need some revision for British English today, the [-in] pronunciation had come to be considered substandard in many parts of the United States, largely because of the crusade that teachers had conducted against it, though it continues to occur rather widely in unselfconscious speech on all social levels. Many spellings and rimes in our older literature testify to the orthodoxy of what is popularly called “dropping the *g*”—in phonological terms, using dental [n] instead of velar [ŋ], for there is of course no [g] to be dropped. For instance, Swift wrote the couplets “See then what mortals place their bliss in! / Next morn betimes the bride was missing” (“Phyllis”) and the delicate “His jordan [chamber pot] stood in manner fitting / Between his legs, to spew or spit in” (“Cassinus and Peter”). **Inverse spellings** such as Shakespeare’s *cushings* (*cushions*), *javelings* (*javelins*), and *napking* (*napkin*) tell the same story (cited by Kökeritz, *Shakespeare’s Pronunciation* 314).

## EVIDENCE FOR EARLY MODERN PRONUNCIATION

Our knowledge of early Modern English pronunciation comes from many sources. Fortunately not all gentlefolk knew how to spell in earlier days, which is to say that they did not know conventional spellings. So they spelled phonetically, according to their lights. What is by modern standards a “misspelling,” like *coat* for *court* or *crick* for *creek*, may tell us a good deal about the writer’s pronunciation. A good many such writings have come down to us.

### STRESS

Many words in early Modern English were stressed otherwise than they are in current speech, as we can tell especially from poetry. *Character*, *illustrate*, *concentrate*, and *contemplate* were all stressed on their second syllables, and most polysyllabic words in *-able* and *-ible* had initial stress, frequently with secondary stress on their penultimate syllables, as in Shakespeare’s “’Tis sweet and commendable in your Nature Hamlet.” *Antique*, like *complete* and other words that now have final stress, had initial stress; *antique* is a doublet of *antic*, with which it was identical in pronunciation. But it is not always possible to come to a firm conclusion on the basis of verse, as the many instances of variant stress in Shakespeare’s lines indicate (Kökeritz, *Shakespeare’s Pronunciation* 392–8). It is likely that most of these variant stress placements occurred in actual speech; it would be surprising if they had not, considering the variations that occur in current English.

### SCHOLARLY STUDIES

Henry Wyld in his *History of Modern Colloquial English* has used many memoirs, letters, diaries, and documents from this period as the basis for his conclusions concerning the pronunciation of early Modern English. Kökeritz relies somewhat more than Wyld on the grammars and spelling books that began to appear around the middle of the sixteenth century, which he considers “our most important sources of information” (17) for the pronunciation of English in Shakespeare’s day—works

such as John Hart's *An Orthographic* (1569) and *A Methode or Comfortable Beginning for All Unlearned* (1570), William Bullokar's *Booke at Large* (1580) and *Bref Grammar for English* (1586), Richard Mulcaster's *The First Part of the Elementarie* (1582), and, in the following century, Alexander Gill's *Logonomia Anglica* (1619; 2nd ed., 1621) and Charles Butler's *English Grammar* (1633; 2nd ed., 1634), which has a list of homophones in its "Index of Words Like and Unlike." These same works, with others, provide the basis for Dobson's two-volume *English Pronunciation 1500–1700*.

There are special studies of these early Modern writers on language by Otto Jespersen (on Hart), Bror Danielsson (Hart and Gill), and R. E. Zachrisson (Bullokar), along with general studies of early Modern English by Wilhelm Horn and Martin Lehnert, Eilert Ekwall (*A History of Modern English Sounds and Morphology*), and Karl Luick. The first volume of Jespersen's *Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* deals with early Modern English phonology and orthography.

The use of wordplay and rime has already been alluded to a number of times. Kökeritz makes extensive and most effective use of these in *Shakespeare's Pronunciation*, a work that has been cited a number of times heretofore. There is no dearth of evidence, though what we have is often difficult to interpret.

## EARLY MODERN ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED

### SPELLING

The following paragraph is the chapter "Rosemary" from Banckes's *Herball* (1525), a hodgepodge of botanical and medical lore and a good deal of sheer superstition thrown together and "impyrnted by me Richard Banckes, dwellynge in London, a lytel fro y<sup>e</sup> Stockes in y<sup>e</sup> Pultry, y<sup>e</sup> .xxv. day of Marche. The yere of our lorde .M.CCCCC. & xxv." The only known original copies of this old black-letter "doctor book" are one in the British Museum and one in the Huntington Library in California. What became of the many other copies of the work, which went through at least fifteen editions, no one can say.

Noteworthy orthographic features of the book include the spelling y<sup>e</sup> for *the* or *thee*, explained earlier in this chapter. Also, a line or tilde-like diacritic over a vowel indicates omission of a following *n* or *m*, as in *thē* for *them* and *thā* for *than*. This device is very ancient. The virgules, or slanting lines, are the equivalents of our commas, used to indicate brief pauses in reading. As was the custom, *v* is used initially (*venymous*, *vnder*) and *u* elsewhere (*hurte*, *euyll*), regardless of whether consonant or vowel was represented. Some of the final *e*'s are used for justifying lines of type—that is, making even right-hand margins—a most useful expedient when type had to be set by hand. Long *s* (ſ), which must be carefully distinguished from the similar "f," is used initially and medially.

The statement in the first line about the herb's being "hote and dry" is an allusion to an ancient theory of matter that classified the nature of everything as a combination of hot or cold and moist or dry qualities.

### Rosemary.

This herbe is hote and dry/ take the flowres and put them in a linnen clothe/ & fo boyle them in fayre clene water to y<sup>e</sup> halfe & coole it & drynke it/ for it is moche worth agaynft all euylles in the body. Also take the flowres & make powder therof and bynde it to the ryght arme in a linnen clothe/ and it shall make the lyght and mery. Also ete the flowres with hony fastyng with fowre breed and there shall ryse in the none euyl swellynges. Also take the flowres and put them in a cheft amonge youre clothes or amonge bokes and moughtes [moths] shall not hurte them. Also boyle the flowres in gotes mylke & than let them stande all a nyght vnder the ayer fayre couered/ after that gyue hym to drynke thereof that hath the tyfye [phthisic] and it shall delyuer hym. Also boyle the leues in whyte wyne & waffe thy face therewith/ thy berde & thy browes and there shall no cornes growe out/ but thou shall haue a fayre face. Also put the leues vnder thy beddes heed/ & thou shall be delyuered of all euyl dremes. Also breke y<sup>e</sup> leues small to powder & laye them on a Canker & it shall flee it. Also take the leues & put the into a vessel of wyne and it shall preferue y<sup>e</sup> wyne fro tartnesse & euyl sauour/ and yf thou sell that wyne, thou shall haue good lucke & spede [success] in the sale. Also yf thou be feble with vnkyndly [unnatural] swette/ take and boyle the leues in clene water, & whan y<sup>e</sup> water is colde do [put] therto as moche of whyte wyne/ & than make therin foppes & ete thou well therof/ & thou shall recouer appetyte. Also yf thou haue the flux boyle y<sup>e</sup> leues in stronge Ayfell [vinegar] & than bynde them in a lynnē [c]lothe and bynde it to thy wombe [belly] & anone the flux shall withdrawe. Also yf thy legges be blowen with the gout/ boyle the leues in water/ & than take the leues & bynde them in a linnen clothe aboute thy legges/ & it shall do y<sup>e</sup> moche good. Also take the leues and boyle them in stronge Ayfell & bynde them in a clothe to thy stomake/ & it shall delyuer y<sup>e</sup> of all euylles. Also yf thou haue the coughe/ drynke the water of the leues boyled in whyte wyne/ & thou shall be hole. Also take the rynde of Rosemary & make powder therof and drynke it for the poxe [head cold]/ & thou shall be delyuered therof. Also take the tymbre therof & brūne [burn] it to coles & make powder therof & thā put it into a linnen cloth and rubbe thy tethe therewith/ & yf there be ony wormes therin it shall flee them & kepe thy tethe from all euyls. Also make the a box of the wood and smell to it and it shall preferne<sup>1</sup> thy youthe. Also put therof in thy doores or in thy howse & thou shall be without daunger of Adders and other ven-ymous serpentes. Also make the a barell therof & drynke thou of the drynke that standeth therin & thou nedes to fere no poyson that shall hurte y<sup>e</sup>/ and yf thou set it in thy garden kepe it honestly [decently] for it is moche profytable. Also yf a mā haue lost his smellynge of the ayre orelles he maye not drawe his brethe/ make a fyre of the wood & bake his breed therewith & gyue it hym to ete & he shall be hole.

### PRONUNCIATION

All quotations from Shakespeare's plays in this chapter are from the First Folio (facsimile ed., London, 1910) with the line numbering of the *Globe* edition (1891) as given in Bartlett's *Concordance*. Roman type has been substituted for the italic used for proper names occurring in speeches in the First Folio, except for one instance in the passage cited below.

<sup>1</sup> The printer has inadvertently turned the *u* that was in his copy, to make an *n*.

In the passage from Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* (2.4.255–66) that follows, the phonetic transcription indicates a somewhat conservative pronunciation that was probably current in the south of England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Vowel length is indicated only in the single word *reason(s)*, in which it was distinctive. Stress is indicated, but no attempt has been made to show fine gradations. Prince Hal, Poins, and Falstaff, who has just told a whopping lie, are speaking:

- Prin.* Why, how could'st thou know these men in Kendall Greene, when it  
[wəɪ 'həʊ 'kʊdst ðəʊ 'no ðɪz 'mɛn ɪn 'kɛndəl 'grɪn 'hwɛn ɪt  
was fə darke, thou could'st not see thy Hand? Come, tell vs your reason:  
wəz 'so 'dærk ðəʊ 'kʊdst nɒt 'si ðəɪ 'hænd 'kʊm 'tɛl əs jər 'rɛːzən  
what say'st thou to this?  
hwæt 'sɛst ðəʊ tə 'ðɪs
- Poin.* Come, your reason *Iack*, your reason.  
'kʊm jər 'rɛːzən 'jæk jər 'rɛːzən
- Falst.* What, vpon compulsion? No: were I at the Strappado, or all the  
'hwæt ə'pɒn kəm'pʊlsjən 'no 'wɛr əɪ æt ðə strə'pædɔ ər 'ɔl ðə  
Racks in the World, I would not tell you on compulsion. Giue you a  
'ræks ɪn ðə 'wɜːld əɪ 'wʊld nɒt 'tɛl ju ɒn kəm'pʊlsjən 'gɪv ju ə  
reason on compulsion? If Reasons were as plentie as Black-berries,  
'rɛːzən ɒn kəm'pʊlsjən ɪf 'rɛːzənz wɛr əz 'plɛnti əz 'blæk'berɪz  
I would giue no man a Reason vpon compulsion, I.  
əɪ wəd 'gɪv 'no 'mæn ə 'rɛːzən ə'pɒn kəm'pʊlsjən 'əɪ]

In this transcription it is assumed that Falstaff, a gentleman (even if a somewhat decayed one) and an officer as well, would have been highly conservative in pronunciation, thus preferring slightly old-fashioned [sy] in *compulsion* to the newer [ʃ] to be heard in the informal speech of his time (Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* 317). It is also assumed that Falstaff used an unstressed form of *would* [wəd] in his last sentence, in contrast to the strongly stressed form [wʊld] of his second sentence, and that, even though the Prince may have had the sequence [hw] in his speech, he would not have pronounced the [h] in his opening interjectional *Why*, thus following the usual practice of those American speakers of the last century who had [hw] when the word is interrogative, but [w] when it is an interjection or an expletive (Kenyon 159).

It is a great pity that there was no tape recorder at the Globe playhouse.



## FOR FURTHER READING

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Black. *A History of the British Isles*.  
 ———. *A New History of England*.  
 Morgan. *The Oxford History of Britain*.

### OVERVIEWS

- Barber. *Early Modern English*.  
 Görlach. *Eighteenth-Century English*.  
 ———. *Introduction to Early Modern English*.  
 Lass. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. Vol. 3: 1476–1776.  
 Wright. *The Development of Standard English 1300–1800*.  
 Wyld. *A History of Modern Colloquial English*.

### THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

- Wolfe. *Linguistic Change and the Great Vowel Shift in English*.  
 Zachrisson. *Pronunciation of English Vowels, 1400–1700*.

### SHAKESPEAREAN ENGLISH

- Kökeritz. *Shakespeare's Pronunciation*.  
 Onions. *A Shakespeare Glossary*.  
 Partridge. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*.  
 Zachrisson. *English Pronunciation at Shakespeare's Time*.

### DICTIONARIES, USAGE, AND STANDARD ENGLISH

- Fisher. *The Emergence of Standard English*.  
 Lancashire. *Early Modern English Dictionaries Database*.  
 Leonard. *Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700–1800*.  
 Reddick. *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 1746–1773*.  
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 Starnes and Noyes. *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson, 1604–1755*.



## CHAPTER

## 8

THE EARLY MODERN  
ENGLISH PERIOD  
(1500–1800)

## Forms, Syntax, and Usage

The early part of the Modern English period saw the establishment of the standard written language we know today. Its standardization was due first to the need of the central government for regular procedures by which to conduct its business, to keep its records, and to communicate with the citizens of the land. Standard languages are often the by-products of bureaucracy, developed to meet a specific administrative need, as prosaic as such a source is, rather than spontaneous developments of the populace or the artifice of writers and scholars. John H. Fisher has argued that standard English was first the language of the Court of Chancery, founded in the fifteenth century to give prompt justice to English citizens and to consolidate the king's influence in the nation. It was then taken up by the early printers, who adapted it for other purposes and spread it wherever their books were read, until finally it fell into the hands of schoolteachers, dictionary makers, and grammarians.

The impulse to study language did not, in the first instance, arise out of a disinterested passion for knowledge, just as the development of a standard language did not spring from artistic motives. Both were highly practical matters, and they were interrelated. A standard language is spread widely over a large region, is respected because people recognize its usefulness, and is codified in the sense of having been described so that people know what it is. A standard language has to be studied and described before it is fully standard, and the detailed study of a language has to have an object that is worth the intense effort such study requires. So the existence of a standard language and the study of that language go together.

Two principal genres of language description are the dictionary and the grammar book. Dictionaries focus on the words of a language; grammar books, on how words relate to one another in a sentence. The writing of dictionaries and of grammar books for English began and achieved a high level of competence during the early Modern English period. Several motives prompted their development.

English had replaced French as the language of government in the late Middle English period. It replaced Latin as the language of religion after the Reformation, and particularly with the 1549 adoption of the Book of Common Prayer, which presented church services in a language “understood of the people,” as the Articles of Religion put it. English was being used again for secular purposes after nearly three hundred years of not having been so used, and it was being used for sacred purposes that were new to it. These revived and new uses provided a strong motive for “getting it right.” In addition, English people were discovering their place on the international scene, both political and cultural, and that discovery also prompted a desire to make the language “copious,” that is, having a large enough vocabulary to deal with all the new subjects English people needed to talk about.

In addition, social mobility was becoming easier and more widespread than ever before. Social classes were never impermeable in England. Geoffrey Chaucer’s ancestors must have been shoemakers, judging from his surname, which is from an Old French word *chausse*, meaning ‘footwear, leggings,’ and his father was a wine merchant, yet he became an intimate of royals and a diplomat on the Continent for the English king—talent will out. However, the later part of the early Modern period, particularly the eighteenth century, saw a significant shift of power and importance from king to Parliament and from the landed gentry to the mercantile middle class. The newly empowered middle class did not share the old gentry’s confidence of manners and language. Instead, they wanted to know what was “right.” They looked for guidance in language and in other matters. Lexicographers and grammarians were only too happy to oblige them.

## THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

### EARLY DICTIONARIES

The first English dictionaries appeared in the early Modern English period. If one had to set up a line of development for them, one would start with the Old and Middle English interlinear glosses in Latin and French texts, then proceed through the bilingual vocabularies produced by schoolmasters and designed for those studying foreign languages, specifically Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish. But the first work designed expressly for listing and defining English words for English-speaking people was the schoolmaster Robert Cawdrey’s *Table Alphabeticall* (1604) (“conteyning and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French. &c.”).

Other dictionaries followed in the same tradition of explaining “hard words” but gradually moved toward a full list of the English vocabulary, among them, that of John Bullokar, Doctor of Physick, *An English Expositour* (1616); Henry Cockeram’s *English Dictionarie* (1623); Thomas Blount’s *Glossographia* (1656); Edward Phillips’s *New World of English Words* (1658); Edward Cocker’s *English Dictionary* (1704); and Nathan Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721), with a second volume that was really a supplement appearing in 1727. In 1730, Bailey (and others) produced the *Dictionarium Britannicum*, with about 48,000 entries. In 1755 Samuel Johnson published his great two-volume *Dictionary*

of the *English Language*, which was based on the *Dictionarium Britannicum*, though containing fewer entries than it.

The publication of Johnson's *Dictionary* was certainly the most important linguistic event of the eighteenth century, not to say the entire period under discussion, for to a large extent it "fixed" English spelling and established a standard for the use of words. Johnson did indeed attempt to exercise a directive function. It would have been strange had he not done so at that time. For most people it is apparently not sufficient, even today, for the lexicographer simply to record and define the words of the language and to indicate how they are pronounced by those who use them; he is also supposed to have some God-given power of determining which words are "good" words and which are "bad" ones and to know how they "ought" to be pronounced. But Johnson had the good sense usually to recognize the prior claims of usage over the arbitrary appeals to logic, analogy, Latin grammar, and sheer prejudice so often made by his contemporaries, even if he did at times settle matters by appeals to his own taste—which was fortunately good taste.

The son of a bookseller in Lichfield, Johnson was a Tory in both name and conviction. Hence, along with his typical eighteenth-century desire to "fix" the language went a great deal of respect for upper-class usage. He can thus be said truly to have consolidated a standard of usage that was not altogether of his own making. His use of illustrative quotations, literally by the thousands, was an innovation; but his own definitions show the most discriminating judgment. The quirky definitions, like that for *oats*—"a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people"—are well-known, so well-known that some people must have the false impression that there are very many others not so well-known. It is in a way unfortunate that these dictionary jokes have been played up for their amusement value, for they are actually few in number.

## EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ATTITUDES TOWARD GRAMMAR AND USAGE

The purist attitude predominant in eighteenth-century England was the manifestation of an attitude toward language that has been current in all times and in all places, as it is in our own day. Doubtless there are and have been purists—persons who believe in an absolute and unwavering standard of "correctness"—in even the most undeveloped societies, for **purism** is a matter of temperament rather than of culture.

Although very dear to American purists, the "rules" supposed to govern English usage originated not in America, but in the mother country. The Englishmen who formulated them were as ill-informed and as inconsistent as their slightly later American counterparts. Present-day notions of "correctness" are to a large extent based on the notion, prominent in the eighteenth century, that language is of divine origin and hence was perfect in its beginnings but is constantly in danger of corruption and decay unless it is diligently kept in line by wise people who are able to get themselves accepted as authorities, such as those who write dictionaries and grammars.

Latin was regarded as having retained much of its original "perfection." No one seems to have been very much aware that the language of Rome was the culmination

of a long development with many changes of the sort deplored in English. When English grammars came to be written, they were based on Latin grammar, even down to the terminology. The most influential of the eighteenth-century advocates of **prescriptive grammar**, who aimed at bringing English into a Latin-like state of perfection, was Robert Lowth (1710–87). He was a theologian, Hebraist, professor of poetry at Oxford from 1741 to 1753, later bishop of Oxford, then of London, and dean of the Chapel Royal, who four years before his death was offered the archbishopric of Canterbury, but refused it.

In the preface to his *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), Lowth agreed with Dean Swift's charge, made in 1712 in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining* [that is, fixing or making certain] *the English Tongue*, that "our language is extremely imperfect," "that it offends against every part of grammar," and that most of the "best authors of our age" commit "many gross improprieties, which . . . ought to be discarded." Lowth was able to find many egregious blunders in the works of our most eminent writers; his footnotes are filled with them. It apparently never occurred to any of his contemporaries to doubt that so famous and successful a man had inside information about an ideal state of the English language. Perhaps they thought he got it straight from a linguistic Yahweh.

In any case, Lowth set out in all earnestness in the midst of a busy life to do something constructive about the deplorable English written by the masters of English literature. Like most men of his time, he believed in universal grammar. Consequently he believed that English was "easily reducible to a System of rules." Among many other achievements, he promulgated the rules for *shall* and *will* that had been formulated by John Wallis in his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*. Those rules, which continue to be cited by prescriptivists, were never accurate and are irrelevant for most speakers today.

One of the most influential of the late eighteenth-century grammarians was Lindley Murray, a Philadelphia-born Quaker who returned to England after the American Revolution and wrote an *English Grammar* for use in Quaker girls' schools. He was motivated by a wish to foster the study of the native language, as opposed to Latin, and by his religious piety, which "predisposed him to regard linguistic matters in terms of right and wrong. His highly moralistic outlook perforce carried over into his attitude toward usage" (Read, "Motivation of Lindley Murray's Grammatical Work" 531).

Although the grammarians who proclaimed rules for language were children of their age, influenced in linguistic matters by their attitudes toward other aspects of life, they must not therefore be thought contemptible. Bishop Lowth was not—and, heaven knows, Dean Swift, one of the glories of English literature, was certainly not. Nor was Joseph Priestley, who, in addition to writing the original and in many respects forward-looking *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761), was the discoverer of oxygen, a prominent nonconformist preacher, and a voluminous writer on theological, scientific, political, and philosophical subjects. Like George Campbell, who in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) went so far as to call language "purely a species of fashion," Priestley recognized the superior force of usage. He also shared Campbell's belief that there was need to control language in some way other than by custom. Being children of the Age of Reason, both had recourse to the principle

of analogy to settle questions of divided usage, though admitting that it was not always possible to do so.

All these men were indeed typical of their time, in most respects a good time; and they were honest men according to their lights, which in other respects were quite bright indeed. We cannot blame them for not having information that was unavailable in their day or for holding attitudes that were universal in their time. Present-day purists cannot claim such justification. Despite the tremendous advances of linguistics since the eighteenth century, popular attitudes toward language have changed very little since Bishop Lowth and Lindley Murray were laying down the law. Their precepts were largely based on what they supposed to be logic and reason, for they believed that the laws of language were rooted in the natural order, and this was of course “reasonable.”

To cite an example, eighteenth-century grammarians outlawed the emphatic double negative construction for the reason stated by Lowth, that “two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative,” just as they do in mathematics, though the analogy is quite false. Many very reasonable people of earlier times produced sentences with two or even more negatives, as many today still do. Chaucer has four in “Forwhy to tellen nas [ne was] nat his entente / To nevere no man” (*Troilus and Criseyde*) and four in his description of the Knight in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*: “He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight.” It certainly never occurred to him that these would cancel out and thus *reverse* his meaning. The double negative is not part of formal standard English today because people who use formal standard English don’t use it—not because it is unreasonable.

Modern linguistics has made very little headway in convincing those who have not studied the subject that language is a living, hence changing, thing, rather than an ideal toward which we should all hopelessly aspire. Some schoolroom grammars and handbooks of English usage continue to perpetuate the tradition of Bishop Lowth’s *Short Introduction to English Grammar*. Indeed, the very word *grammar* means to many highly literate people not the study of language, but merely so simple a thing as making the “proper” choice between *shall* and *will*, *between* and *among*, *different from* and *different than*, and *who* and *whom*, as well as the avoidance of terminal prepositions, *ain’t*, and *It’s me*. In Chapter 9 we examine in more detail the later developments of this comparatively recent tradition, which would be—as Shakespeare says of drunken carousing in Denmark—more honored in the breach than the observance.

## NOUNS

The actual grammar of early Modern English differed in only relatively minor respects from that of either late Middle English or our own time. There was nothing striking to distinguish the grammar of Shakespeare, Milton, and the eighteenth-century novelists from that of fourteenth-century Chaucer or twentieth-century Doris Lessing. Yet many grammatical changes occurred during the three hundred years between 1500 and 1800, some of them in nouns.

As we have seen, by the end of the Middle English period *-es* had been extended to practically all nouns as a genitive singular and caseless plural suffix.

As a result, most nouns had only two forms (*sister*, *sisters*), as they do today in speech. The use of the apostrophe to distinguish the written forms of the genitive singular (*sister's*) and plural (*sisters'*) was not widely adopted until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.

### IRREGULAR PLURALS

The handful of mutated-vowel plurals for the most part resisted the analogical principle, so that *feet*, *geese*, *teeth*, *lice*, *mice*, *men*, and *women* have survived to the present and show no tendency to give way to -s plurals. A few -n plurals remained in early Modern English, including *eyen* 'eyes,' *shoon* 'shoes,' *kine* 'cows,' *brethren*, *children*, and *oxen*. The first two are now obsolete; *kine* continues to eke out a precarious existence as an archaic poetic word; and *brethren* has a very limited currency, confined in serious use mainly to certain religious and fraternal groups. In *kine*, *brethren*, and *children*, the *n* had not been present in Old English but was added by analogy with other -n plurals. The regularly developed *ky* and *childer*, which go back, respectively, to Old English *cȳ* and *cildru*, were current until fairly recently in the dialects of north England and of Scotland. *Brethren* (Old English *brōðor* or *brōðru*) also added an *n* by analogy and introduced a mutated vowel that did not occur in the Old English plural. *Oxen* is thus the only "pure" survival of the Old English weak declension, which formed nominative-accusative plurals with the suffix -an.

**Uninflected plurals** still survive from Old and Middle English times in *deer*, *sheep*, *swine*, *folk*, and *kind*. Analogical *folks* occurred very early in the Modern English period. *Kind* has acquired a new -s plural because of the feeling that the older construction was a "grammatical error," despite the precedent of its use in "these (those, all) kind of" by Shakespeare, Dryden, Swift, Goldsmith, Austen, and others. Its synonym *sort*, which is not of Old English origin, acquired an uninflected plural as early as the sixteenth century by analogy with *kind*, as in "these (those, all) sort of," but this construction is also frowned upon by prescriptivists, despite its use by Swift, Fielding, Austen, Dickens, Trollope, Wells, and others (Jespersen, *Modern English Grammar* 2:68). *Horse* retained its historical uninflected plural, as in Chaucer's "His hors were Goode" (*Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue) and Shakespeare's "Come on, then, horse and chariots let us have" (*Titus Andronicus*), until the seventeenth century, though the analogical plural *horses* had begun to occur as early as the thirteenth. Doubtless by analogy with *deer*, *sheep*, and the like, the names of other creatures that had -s plurals in earlier times came to have uninflected plurals—for example, *fish* and *fowl*, particularly when these are regarded as game. Barnyard creatures take the -s (*fowls*, *ducks*, *pigs*, and so forth); and Jesus Christ distributed to the multitude "a few little *fishes*" (Matthew 15.34). But one shoots (wild) *fowl* and *duck* and catches *fish*. The uninflected plural may be extended to the names of quite un-English beasts, like *antelope* and *buffalo* ("a herd of buffalo").

### HIS-GENITIVE

A remarkable construction is the use of *his*, *her*, and *their* as signs of the genitive (*his-genitive*), as in "Augustus his daughter" (E. K.'s gloss to Spenser's *Shepherds' Calendar*, 1579), "Elizabeth Holland her howse" (State Papers, 1546), and "the

House of Lords their proceedings” (Pepys’s *Diary*, 1667). This use began in Old English times but had its widest currency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as in Shakespeare’s “And art not thou Poincs, his Brother?” (2 *Henry IV*) and in the “Prayer for All Conditions of Men” in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer: “And this we beg for Jesus Christ his sake.”

The use of possessive pronouns as genitive markers seems to have had a double origin. On the one hand, it may have arisen from the sort of topic-comment construction that we still have in present-day English: “My brother—his main interest is football.” Such a construction would have provided a way in Old English to indicate possession for foreign proper names and for other expressions in which the inflected genitive was awkward. The oldest examples we have are from King Alfred’s ninth-century translation of the history of the world by Orosius: “Nilus seo ea hire æwielme is neh þæm clife,” that is, ‘Nile, the river—her source is near the cliff,’ and “Affrica and Asia hiera landgemircu onginnað of Alexandria,” that is, ‘Africa and Asia—their boundaries start from Alexandria.’ An early example with *his* is from Ælfric’s translation of the Book of Numbers (made about the year 1000): “We gesawon Enac his cynryn,” that is, ‘We saw Anak’s kindred.’

On the other hand, many English speakers came to regard the historical genitive ending *-s* as a variant of *his*. In its unstressed pronunciation, *his* was and is still pronounced without an [h], so that “Tom bets his salary” and “Tom Betts’s salary” are identical in pronunciation. Once speakers began to think of “Mars’s armor” as a variant of “Mars his armor,” an association doubtless reinforced by the use of the latter construction from early times as mentioned above, they started to spell the genitive ending *-s* as *his* (Wyld 314–5; Jespersen, *Modern English Grammar* 6: 301–2).

That genitive *-s* was confused with *his* is shown by the occasional use of *his* with females, as in “Mrs. Sands his maid” (*OED*, 1607), and by the mixture of the two spellings, as in “Job’s patience, Moses his meekness, Abraham’s faith” (*OED*, 1568). In the latter example, *his* was used when the genitive ending was pronounced as an extra syllable, and *’s* when it was not, the apostrophe also suggesting that the genitive *-s* was regarded as a contraction of *his*. Other spellings for both *his* and the genitive ending were *is* and *ys*, as in “Harlesdon ys name” and “her Grace is requeste,” that is, ‘her Grace’s request’ (Wyld 315).

*His* (with its variants *is* and *ys*) was much more common in this construction than *her* or *their*. The *his*-genitive, whichever pronoun is used, was most prevalent with proper names and especially after sibilants, as in *Mars*, *Moses*, *Sands*, and *Grace*, an environment in which the genitive ending is homophonous with the unstressed pronunciation of *his*. Although the *his*-genitive in Old English must have been the sort of topic-comment construction cited above, its early Modern English frequency was certainly due, at least in part, to a confusion of inflectional *-s* and *his*. The construction has survived, archaically, in printed bookplates: “John Smith His Book.”

## GROUP GENITIVE

The **group-genitive** construction, as in “King Priam of Troy’s son” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” is a development of the early Modern English period. “Group” in



the term for this construction refers to the fact that the genitive 's is added, not to the noun to which it relates most closely, but rather to whatever word ends a phrase including such a noun. Though there were sporadic occurrences of this construction in Middle English, the usual older idiom is illustrated by Chaucer's "the kyng Priamus sone of Troye" and "The Wyves Tale of Bathe," or its variant "The Wyf of Bathe Hire Tale" with a *his*-genitive (in this case, *hire* for 'her'). What has happened is that a phrase has been taken as a unit, and the sign of the genitive is affixed to the last word of the phrase. The construction also occurs with a pronoun plus *else*, as in "everybody else's," and with nouns connected by a coordinating conjunction, as in "Kenyon and Knott's *Pronouncing Dictionary*" and "an hour or two's time." There are comparatively few literary examples of clauses so treated, but in everyday speech such constructions as "the little boy that lives down the street's dog" and "the woman I live next door to's husband" are frequent. "He is the woman who is the best friend this club has ever had's husband" is an extreme example from Gracie Allen, an early radio and television comedian noted for her confusing speech.

An inflection is added to a word and goes with that word semantically and grammatically. As a consequence of the group genitive, the morpheme we spell 's has ceased to be an inflection and has instead become a grammatical particle always pronounced as part of the preceding word (an **enclitic**), although syntactically it goes with a whole preceding phrase, not with that word alone. Of all the Old English inflectional endings, *-es* (the origin of our 's) has had the most unusual historical development: it has broken off from the nouns to which it was originally added and moved up to the level of phrases, where it functions syntactically like a word on that higher level, although it continues to be pronounced as a mere word ending.

## UNINFLECTED GENITIVE

In early Modern English an **uninflected genitive** occurred in a number of special circumstances, especially for some nouns that were feminine in Old English and occasionally for nouns ending in [s] or preceding words beginning with [s]—for example, *for conscience sake* and *for God sake*. A few uninflected genitives, though not generally recognized as such, survive to the present day in reference to the Virgin Mary—for example, *Lady Day* (that is, Our Lady's Day 'Feast of the Annunciation'), *Lady Chapel* (Our Lady's Chapel), and *ladybird* (Our Lady's bird). Sometimes an uninflected genitive was used as an alternative to the group genitive, as in "the duke of Somerset dowther [daughter]." The uninflected genitive of present-day African-American English (for example, "my brother car"), although of different historical origin, has re-created a structure that was once a part of general English usage.

## ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

The distinction between strong and weak adjective forms, already greatly simplified by the Middle English loss of the final *n*, completely disappeared with the further

loss of [ə] from the end of words. The loss of final [ə] also eliminated the distinction between plural and singular adjectives. Although the letter *e*, which represented the schwa vowel in spelling, continued to be written in many words, often haphazardly, adjectives no longer had grammatical categories of number or definiteness. The Modern English adjective thus came to be invariable in form. The only words that still agree in number with the nouns they modify are the demonstratives *this–these* and *that–those*.

Adjectives and adverbs continued to form comparatives with *-er* and superlatives with *-est*, but increasingly they used **analytical comparison** with *mo(e)* or *more* and with *most*, which had occurred as early as Old English times. The form *mo(e)*, from Old English *mā*, continued in use through the early Modern English period, as in Robert Greene's *A Maiden's Dream* (1591): "No foreign wit could Hatton's overgo: Yet to a friend wise, simple, and no mo." It even lasted into the nineteenth century in Byron's *Childe Harold* (1812): "Ye . . . Shall find some tidings in a future page, If he that rhymeth now may scribble moe." The homophonous and synonymous *mo'* of African-American English has a different origin but is similar in use.

The present stylistic objection to affixing *-er* and *-est* to polysyllables had somewhat less force in the early Modern English period, when forms like *eminenter*, *impudentest*, and *beautifullest* are not particularly hard to find, nor, for that matter, are monosyllables with *more* and *most*, like *more near*, *more fast*, *most poor*, and *most foul*. As was true in earlier times also, a good many instances of **double comparison** like *more fitter*, *more better*, *more fairer*, *most worst*, *most stillest*, and (probably the best-known example) *most unkindest* occur in early Modern English. Comparison could be made with the ending or with the modifying word or, for emphasis, with both.

Many adverbs that now must end in *-ly* did not require the suffix in early Modern English times. The works of Shakespeare furnish many typical examples: *grievous sick*, *indifferent cold*, *wondrous strange*, and *passing* ['surpassingly'] *fair*. Note also the use of *sure* in the following citations, which some nowadays would condemn as "bad English": "If she come in, shee'l sure speake to my wife" (*Othello*); "And sure deare friends my thankes are too deare a halfepeny" (*Hamlet*); "Sure the Gods doe this yeere connive at us" (*Winter's Tale*).

## PRONOUNS

Important changes happened in the pronouns, which are the most highly inflected part of speech in present-day English, thus preserving the earlier synthetic character of our language in a small way.

### PERSONAL PRONOUNS

The early Modern English personal pronouns are shown in the accompanying table.

## PERSONAL PRONOUNS OF EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

	Nominative	Objective	Possessive	
			Attributive	Nominal
<i>Singular</i>				
1 pers.	I	me		my/mine
2 pers.	thou	thee		thy/thine
3 pers., masc.	he, a	him		his
fem.	she	her	her	hers
neut.	(h)it	(h)it		his, it, its
<i>Plural</i>				
1 pers.	we	us	our	ours
2 pers.	ye/you	you/ye	your	yours
3 pers.	they	them, (h)em	their	theirs

*I* came to be capitalized, not through any egotism, but only because lower-case *i* standing alone was likely to be overlooked, being the smallest letter of the alphabet.

In the first and second persons singular, the distinction between *my* and *mine* and between *thy* and *thine* was purely phonological (like the distinction between *a* and *an*), as it had been in Middle English since the thirteenth century; that is, *mine* and *thine* were used before a vowel, *h*, or a pause, and *my* and *thy* before a consonant. This distinction continued to be made until the eighteenth century, when *my* became the only regular first person possessive used attributively (as in “my ear,” earlier “mine ear”). Thereafter *mine* was restricted to use as a nominal (as in “That is mine,” “Mine is here,” and “Put it on mine”), just as the “*s*-forms” *hers*, *ours*, *yours*, *theirs* had been since late Middle English times.

The distinction between attributive and nominal possessive forms thus spread through most of the personal pronoun system. Today the only exceptions are *his*, which uses the same form for both functions, and *its*, which has no nominal function: we do not usually say things like \*“That is its” or \*“Its is here.” (The asterisk before a present-day form, as in the preceding, indicates that the form does not exist, or at least that the writer believes it to be abnormal. This use of the asterisk thus differs from that before historical reconstructions, where it means that the form is not recorded although it or something like it probably did once exist. The two uses agree in indicating that the form so marked is not attested.)

When the distinction between possessives with and without *n* was phonological, a confusion sometimes arose about which word the *n* belonged with. The Fool’s *nuncle* in *King Lear* is due to his misunderstanding of *mine uncle* as *my nuncle*, and it is likely that *Ned*, *Nelly*, and *Noll* (a nickname associated with Oliver Goldsmith) have the same origin from *mine Edward*, *mine Eleanor*, and *mine Oliver*. The confusion is similar to that which today produces *a (whole) nother* from *another* (that is, *an other*).

The loss in ordinary language of singular *thou*, *thee*, and *thy/thine* created a gap in the pronoun system that we have not yet repaired. That loss began with

a shift in the use of *thou* and *ye* forms. As early as the late thirteenth century, the plural forms *ye*, *you*, and *your* began to be used with singular meaning in circumstances of politeness or formality, leaving the singular forms (*thou*, *thee*, *thy/thine*) for intimate, familiar use. In imitation of the French use of *vous* and *tu*, the English historically plural *y*-forms were used in addressing a superior, whether by virtue of social status or age, and in upper-class circles among equals, though highborn lovers might slip into the *th*-forms in situations of intimacy. The *th*-forms were also used by older to younger and by socially superior to socially inferior. The distinction is retained in other languages, which may even have a verb meaning ‘to use the singular form’—for example, French *tutoyer*, Spanish *tutear*, Italian *tuizzare*, German *dutzen*. Late Middle English had *thoute*, with the same meaning.

In losing this distinction, English obviously has lost a useful device, which our older writers frequently employed with artistic discrimination, as in *Hamlet*:

Qu[een]     Hamlet, thou hast thy Father much offended.  
 Ham[let]     Mother, you have my Father much offended.  
 Qu[een]     Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

...

Qu[een]     What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?

The Queen’s *thou* in the first line is what a parent would be expected to say to her child. Hamlet’s “Mother, you have ...” is appropriate from a son to his mother, but there is more than a hint of a rebuff in her choice of the more formal pronoun in “Come, come, you answer ...,” and her return to *thou* in the last line suggests that, in her alarm at Hamlet’s potential violence, she is reminding him of the parental relationship.

Elsewhere also Shakespeare chooses the *y*-forms and the *th*-forms with artistic care, though it is sometimes difficult for a present-day reader, unaccustomed to the niceties offered by a choice of forms, to figure him out, as in the dialogue between two servants, the less imaginative Curtis and the sardonic Grumio, in *The Taming of the Shrew*:

Cur[tis]     Doe you heare ho? you must meete my maister to countenance my mistris.  
 Gru[mio]     Why she hath a face of her owne.  
 Cur[tis]     Who knowes not that?  
 Gru[mio]     Thou it seemes....

Curtis uses the polite *you* to Grumio, but when Curtis fails to understand Grumio’s pun on *countenance* as a verb ‘to give support to’ and a noun ‘face,’ Grumio responds with *thou*, which a superior uses to an inferior. However, the English did not always use the two forms as consistently as the French. Sometimes they seem to be random.

The *th*-forms, which had become quite rare in upper-class speech by the sixteenth century, were completely lost in standard English in the eighteenth, though they have lingered on in some dialects. We are familiar with them mainly in poetry and religious language, especially the King James Bible. A few older-generation members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) may still use *th*-forms when speaking to one another, with *thee* serving as both subject and object.

The third person singular masculine and feminine pronouns have been relatively stable since late Old English times. The unstressed form of *he* was often written *a*, as in “Now might I doe it, but now a is a-praying, / And now Ile doo’t, and so a goes to heaven” from the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*. (The Folio has *he* in both instances.) *She* and *her(s)* show no change since Middle English times.

In the neuter, however, an important change took place in the later part of the sixteenth century, when the new possessive form *its* arose. The older nominative and objective *hit* had lost its *h*- when unstressed; then the *h*-less form came to be used in stressed as well as unstressed positions—though, as has already been pointed out, *hit*, the form preferred by Queen Elizabeth I, remains in nonstandard speech as a stressed form. The old neuter possessive *his* was still usual in the early years of the seventeenth century, as in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*: “But value dwels not in particular will, / It holds his estimate and dignitie.” The *OED* cites an American example from 1634: “Boston is two miles North-east from Roxberry: His situation is very pleasant.”

Perhaps because of its ambiguity, *his* was to some extent avoided as a neuter possessive even in Middle English times: an uninflected *it* occurs from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, and to this day in British dialect usage. The *OED*’s latest citation of it in standard English is from 1622: “Each part as faire doth show / In it kind, as white in Snow.” Other efforts to replace the ambiguous *his* as a possessive for *it* include paraphrases with *thereof*, as in “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24), and *of it*, as in “Great was the fall of it” (Matthew 7). The present-day form *its* (at first written *it’s*, as many people still write it) began to be used by analogy with other possessives ending in *’s*. *Its* is quite rare in Shakespeare and occurs only twice in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; but by the end of the seventeenth century, *its* had become the usual form, completely displacing the other options.

Similar to the use of the second person plural form to refer to a single person is the “regal *we*,” except that it implies a sense of one’s own importance rather than someone else’s. It has been used in proclamations by a sovereign, and to judge by older drama, it was even used in royal conversation. Queen Victoria is said to be the last monarch to employ it as a spoken form, as in her famous but doubtless apocryphal reproof to one of her maids of honor who had told a mildly improper story: “We are not amused.” The “editorial *we*” dates from Old English times. It is sometimes used by one who is a member of a staff of writers, all assumed to share the same opinions. It may also be used to include one’s readers in phrases like “as we have seen.”

In the second person plural, the old distinction between nominative *ye* and objective *you* was still maintained in the King James Bible—for example, “And ye shall know the Trueth, and the Trueth shall make you free” (John 8). It was, however, generally lost during the sixteenth century, when some writers made the distinction, while others did not (Wyld 330). In time the objective *you* completely replaced *ye* in standard English.

Present-day nonstandard speech distinguishes singular and plural *you* in a number of ways; examples include the nonstandard, analogical *youse* of northern American urbanites (also current in Irish English) and the southern mountain *you-uns* (that is, *you ones*), which probably stems from Scots English. *You-all* (or *y’all*)

is in educated colloquial use in the Southern states and is the only new second person plural to have acquired respectability in Modern English. *You guys* is a recent gender-unspecific candidate, as is *you lot* among the British, though the last has patronizing implications.

From the later seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, many speakers made a distinction between singular *you was* and plural *you were*. James Boswell used singular *you was* throughout his *London Journal* (1762–3) and even reported it as coming from the lips of Dr. Johnson: “Indeed, when you was in the irreligious way, I should not have been pleased with you” (July 28, 1763); but in the second edition of his *Life of Johnson*, he changed over to *you were* for both singular and plural. Bishop Robert Lowth, in his very influential *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), condemned *you was* in no uncertain terms as “an enormous Solecism,” but George Campbell testified in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) that “it is ten times oftener heard.” *You was* at one time was very common in cultivated American use also: George Philip Krapp (*English Language in America* 2:261) cites its use by John Adams in a letter of condolence to a friend whose house had burned down: “You regret your loss; but why? Was you fond of seeing or thinking that others saw and admired so stately a pile?” The construction became unfashionable in the early nineteenth century.

In the third person plural, the native *h*-forms had become archaic by the end of the fifteenth century, when the *th*-forms (*they*, *them*, *their*, *theirs*) gradually took over. The single *h*-form to survive is the one earlier written *hem*, and it survives only as an unstressed form, written *’em* when it is written at all. The plural possessives in *h*- (*here*, *her*, *hir*) occurred only very rarely after the beginning of the sixteenth century.

## RELATIVE AND INTERROGATIVE PRONOUNS

The usual Old English relative particle was *þe*, which had only one form. It is a pity that it was ever lost. Middle English adapted the neuter demonstrative pronoun *that*, without inflection, for the same relative function, later adding the previously interrogative *which*, sometimes preceded by *the*, and also uninflected. It was not until the sixteenth century that the originally interrogative *who* (OE *hwā*) came to be commonly used as a simple relative to refer to persons. It had somewhat earlier been put to use as an indefinite relative, that is, as the equivalent of present *who(m)ever*, a use now rare but one that can be seen in Shakespeare’s “Who tels me true, though in his Tale lye death, / I heare him as he flatter’d” (*Antony and Cleopatra*) and Byron’s “Whom the gods love die young” (*Don Juan*). The King James Bible, which we should expect to be a little behind the times in its grammar, has *which* where today we would use *who*, as in “The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field” (Matthew 13) and in “Our Father which art in heaven.” This translation was the work of almost fifty theological scholars appointed by James I, and it was afterward reviewed by the bishops and other eminent scholars. It is not surprising that these men should have been little given to anything that smacked of innovation. Shakespeare, who with all his daring as a coiner and user of words was essentially conservative in his syntax, also uses *which* in the older fashion to refer to persons and things alike, as in “he which hath your Noble Father slaine” (*Hamlet*).

## CASE FORMS OF THE PRONOUNS

In the freewheeling usage of earlier days, there was less concern than now with what are thought to be “proper” case forms. English had to wait until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the rise of a prescriptive attitude toward language, which is a relatively new thing. After a coordinating conjunction, for instance, the nominative form tended to occur invariably, as indeed it still does, whether the pronoun is object of verb or preposition or second element of a compound subject. H. C. Wyld (332) cites “with you and I” from a letter by Sir John Suckling, to which may be added Shakespeare’s “all debts are cleerd betweene you and I” (*Merchant of Venice*). No doubt at the present time the desire to be “correct” causes many speakers who may have been reproved as children for saying “Mary and me went downtown” to use “Mary and I” under all circumstances; but hypercorrectness is hardly a satisfactory explanation for the phenomenon because it occurs in the writings of well-bred people from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, a period when people of consequence talked pretty much as they pleased.

Prescriptive grammar requires the nominative form after *as* and *than* in such sentences as “Is she as tall as me?” (*Antony and Cleopatra*). Boswell, who wrote in a period when men of strong minds and characters were attempting to “regularize” the English language, shows no particular pattern of consistency in this construction. In the entry in his *London Journal* for June 5, 1763, he writes “I was much stronger than her,” but elsewhere uses the nominative form in the same construction. The basic question for grammarians is whether *than* and *as* are to be regarded as prepositions, which would require the objective form consistently, or as subordinating conjunctions, after which the choice of case form should be determined by expanding the construction, as in “I know him better than she (knows him)” or “I know him better than (I know) her.” Present-day prescriptivists opt for the second analysis, but speakers tend to follow either, as the spirit moves them.

In early Modern English, the nominative and objective forms of the personal pronouns, particularly *I* and *me*, tend to occur more or less indiscriminately after the verb *be*. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who, though a fool, is yet a gentleman, uses both forms within a few lines: “That’s mee I warrant you. . . . I knew ’twas I.” The generally inconsistent state of things is exemplified by Shakespeare’s use of other pronouns as well: “I am not thee” (*Timon of Athens*); “you are not he” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*); “And damn’d be him, that first cries hold, enough” (*Macbeth*); “you are she” (*Twelfth Night*). In “Here’s them” (*Pericles*), *them* is functionally the subject, but the speaker is a fisherman.

Today also objective personal pronouns continue to occur after *be*, though not without bringing down upon the head of the user the thunder of those who regard themselves as guardians of the language. There are nevertheless a great many speakers of standard English who do not care and who say “It’s me” when there is occasion to do so, despite the doctrine that “the verb *to be* can never take an object.” There is little point in labeling the construction colloquial or informal as contrasted with a supposedly formal “It is I,” inasmuch as the utterance would not be likely to occur alone anywhere except in conversation. If a following relative clause has *am*, “It is I” would be usual, as in “It is I who am responsible,” though “It is me” occurs before other relative clauses, as in “It’s me who’s responsible” and “It is

me that he's hunting." What has been said of *me* after forms of *be* applies also to *us*, *him*, *her*, and *them*.

The "proper" choice between *who* and *whom*, whether interrogative or relative, frequently involves an intellectual chore that many speakers from about 1500 on have been little concerned with. The interrogative pronoun, coming as it usually does before the verb, tended in early Modern English to be invariably *who*, as it still does in unselfconscious speech. Otto Jespersen cites interrogative *who* as object before the verb from Marlowe, Greene, Ben Jonson, the old *Spectator* of Addison and Steele, Goldsmith, and Sheridan, with later examples from Thackeray, Mrs. Humphry Ward, and Shaw. Alexander Schmidt's *Shakespeare-Lexicon* furnishes fifteen quotations for interrogative *who* in this construction and then adds an "etc.," though, as Jespersen (*Modern English Grammar* 7:242) points out, "Most modern editors and reprinters add the *-m* everywhere in accordance with the rules of 'orthodox' grammar." Compare his earlier and somewhat bitter statement that they show thereby "that they hold in greater awe the schoolmasters of their own childhood than the poet of all the ages" (*Progress in Language* 216). It is an amusing irony that *whom*-sleuths, imagining that they are great traditionalists, are actually adhering to a fairly recent standard as far as the period from the fifteenth century on is concerned. In view of the facts, such a sentence as "Who are you waiting for?" can hardly be considered untraditional.

Relative *who* as object of verb or preposition is also frequent. For Shakespeare, Schmidt uses the label "etc." after citing a dozen instances, and Jespersen cites from a few other authors. The *OED* reports that *whom* as an object is "no longer current in natural colloquial speech." There are, however, a good many instances of *whom* for the nominative, especially as a relative that may be taken as the object of the main-clause verb, as in Matthew 16: "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" Both Shakespeare's "Whom in constancie you thinke stands so safe" (*Cymbeline*) and "Yong Ferdinand (whom they suppose is droun'd)" (*Tempest*) would be condemned by all prescriptive grammarians nowadays. But Shakespeare, who is representative of early Modern English, uses such constructions alongside others with the "approved" form of the construction, such as "I should do Brutus wrong, and Cassius wrong: / who (you all know) are Honourable men" (*Julius Caesar*). The "incorrect" use of *whom* occurs very frequently during the whole Modern English period. Jespersen, whose *Modern English Grammar* is a storehouse of illustrative material, has many examples ranging from Chaucer to the present day (3:198–9), and Sir Ernest Gowers cites instances from E. M. Forster, Lord David Cecil, the *Times*, and Somerset Maugham, all of which might be presumed to be standard English.

## VERBS

### CLASSES OF STRONG VERBS

Throughout the history of English, strong verbs—always a minority—have fought a losing battle, either joining the ranks of the weak verbs or being lost altogether. In those strong verbs that survive, the Old English four principal parts (infinitive, preterit singular, preterit plural, past participle) have been reduced to three, with



the new preterit from either the old singular or the old plural. Only a few verbs show regular development, so the orderly arrangement into classes that prevailed in the older periods is now history. Indeed, today the distinction between strong and weak verbs is less important than that between regular verbs, all of which are weak (like *talk*, *talked*, *talked*), and irregular verbs, which may be either strong (like *sing*, *sang*, *sung*) or weak (like *think*, *thought*, *thought*). The following brief account of the Modern English development of the seven classes of Old English strong verbs is thus now a purely historical matter.

Class I remains rather clearly defined. The regular development of this class, with the Modern English preterit from the old preterit singular, is illustrated by the following:

drive	drove	driven
ride	rode	ridden
rise	rose	risen
smite	smote	smitten
stride	strode	stridden
strive	strove	striven
thrive	throve	thriven
write	wrote	written

Also phonologically regular, but with the Modern English preterit from the old preterit plural (whose vowel was identical with that of the past participle), are the following, of which *chide* and *hide* are originally weak verbs that have become strong by analogy:

bite	bit	bitten
chide	chid	chidden
hide	hid	hidden
slide	slid	slid(den)

The following verbs, on the contrary, have a vowel in the preterit and past participle derived from the old preterit singular:

abide	abode	abode
shine	shone	shone

*Dive–dove (dived)–dived* is another weak verb that has acquired a strong preterit. *Strike–struck–struck* has a preterit of uncertain origin; the regularly developed past participle *stricken* is now used only metaphorically.

In early Modern English many of these verbs had alternative forms, some of which survive either in standard use or in the dialects, whereas others are now archaic. There is a Northern form for the preterit of *drive* in “And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians . . . and drave them out from before you” (Judges 6). Other now nonstandard forms are represented by “And the people chode [chided] with Moses” (Numbers 20) and “I imagined that your father had wrote in such a way” (Boswell, *London Journal*, December 30, 1762). Other verbs of

this class have become weak (for example, *glide*, *gripe*, *spew*, and *writhe*). Still others have disappeared altogether from the language.

The verbs of Class II have likewise undergone many changes in the course of their development into their present forms. Only a handful survive, of which the following have taken their preterit vowel from the old past participle:

choose	chose	chosen
cleave	clove	cloven
freeze	froze	frozen

*Fly–flew–flown* has a preterit formed perhaps by analogy with Class VII verbs.

A development of the Old English past participle of *freeze* is used as an archaism in Shelley's "Snow-fed streams now seen athwart frore [frozen] vapours," which the OED suggests is a reflection of Milton's "The parching Air Burns frore" (*Paradise Lost*). Other variant forms are in "This word (Rebellion) it had froze them up" (2 *Henry IV*); "O what a time have you chose out brave Caius / To weare a Kerchiefe" (*Julius Caesar*); and "Certain men clave to Paul" (Acts 17).

The following surviving verbs of Class II are now weak: *bow* 'bend,' *brew*, *chew*, *creep*, *crowd*, *flee*, *lie* 'prevaricate,' *lose*, *reek*, *rue*, *seethe*, *shove*, *sprout*, and *suck*. *Sodden*, the old strong participle of *seethe* (with voicing according to Verner's Law), is still sometimes used as an adjective. *Crope*, a strong preterit of *creep*, occurs in formal English as late as the eighteenth century and in folk speech to the present day.

Practically all verbs of Class III with nasal consonants that have survived from Old English have retained their strong inflection. The following derive their preterit from the old preterit singular:

begin	began	begun
drink	drank	drunk
ring	rang	rung
shrink	shrank	shrunk
sing	sang	sung
sink	sank	sunk
spring	sprang	sprung
stink	stank	stunk
swim	swam	swum

In *run–ran–run* (ME infinitive *rinnen*) the vowel of the participle was in early Modern English extended into the present tense; *run* is otherwise like the preceding verbs. In the following, the modern preterit vowel is from the old preterit plural and past participle:

cling	clung	clung
slink	slunk	slunk
spin	spun	spun
sting	stung	stung
swing	swung	swung
win	won	won
wring	wrung	wrung

A few verbs entering the language after Old English times have conformed to this pattern—for example, *fling*, *sling*, and *string*. By the same sort of analogy, the

weak verb *bring* has acquired in nonstandard speech the strong preterit and participial form *brung*. Though lacking the nasal, *dig* (not of Old English origin) and *stick*, which at first had weak inflection, have taken on the same pattern.

The consonant cluster *-nd* had early lengthened a preceding vowel, so the principal parts of the following verbs, although quite different in their vowels from those of the preceding group, have the same historical development:

bind	bound	bound
find	found	found
grind	ground	ground
wind	wound	wound

Allowing for the influence of Middle English [ç, x] (spelled *h* or *gh*) on a preceding vowel, *fight–fought–fought* also has a regular development into Modern English. All other surviving verbs of this class have become weak (some having done so in Middle English times): *bark*, *braid*, *burn*, *burst* (also with an invariant preterit and participle), *carve*, *climb*, *delve*, *help*, *melt*, *mourn*, *spurn*, *starve*, *swallow*, *swell*, *yell*, *yelp*, and *yield*. The old participial forms *molten* and *swollen* are still used but only as adjectives. *Holp*, an old strong preterit of *help*, was common until the seventeenth century and survives in current nonstandard usage. The old participial form *holpen* is used in the King James Bible—for instance, in “He hath holpen his servant Israel” (Luke 1).

Most surviving Class IV verbs have borrowed the vowel of the old past participle for their preterit:

break	broke	broken
speak	spoke	spoken
steal	stole	stolen
weave	wove	woven

Verbs with an [r] after the vowel follow the same pattern, although the [r] has affected the quality of the preceding vowel in the infinitive:

bear	bore	borne
shear	shore	shorn
swear	swore	sworn
tear	tore	torn
wear	wore	worn

The last was originally a weak verb; it acquired strong principal parts by analogy with the verbs of Class IV that it rimed with.

*Get* was a loanword from Scandinavian. It and *tread* (like *speak*, originally a Class V verb) have shortened vowels in all their principal parts:

get	got	got(ten)
tread	trod	trodden

*Come–came–come* has regular phonological development from the Middle English verb, whose principal parts were, however, already irregular in form. A variant preterit *come* was frequent in early Modern English—for example, in Pepys’s

*Diary*: “Creed come and dined with me” (June 15, 1666), although Pepys also uses *came*; today the variant occurs mainly in folk speech. Variant preterits for other verbs were also common in early Modern English, as in “When I was a child, I spake as a child” (I Corinthians 13); “And when he went forth to land, there met him . . . a certain man, which had devils long time, and ware no clothes” (Luke 8); “And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and brake the loaves” (Mark 6); “And they brought him unto him; and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him” (Mark 9).

Verbs of Class V have all diverged in one way or another from what might be considered regular development. *Eat-ate-eaten* has in its preterit a lengthened form of the vowel of the Middle English preterit singular (which, if it had survived into Modern English, would have been \**at*). The preterit in British English, although it is spelled like the American form, is pronounced in a way that would be better represented as *et*; it is derived perhaps by analogy with the preterit *read*.

*Bid* and *forbid* have two preterits in current English. (*For*)*bade*, traditionally pronounced [bæd] but now often [bed] from the spelling, was originally a lengthened form of the Middle English preterit singular. The preterit (*for*)*bid* has its vowel from the past participle, which, in turn, probably borrowed it from the present stem, by analogy with verbs that have the same vowel in those two forms.

*Give-gave-given* is a Scandinavian loanword that displaced the native English form. (The latter appears, for example, in Chaucer’s use as *yeven-yaf-yeven*.) Variants are evidenced by Pepys’s “This day I sent my cozen Roger a tierce of claret, which I give him” (August 21, 1667) and Shakespeare’s “When he did frown, O, had she then gave over” (*Venus and Adonis*).

*Sit* had in early Modern English the preterit forms *sat*, *sate*, and (occasionally) *sit*; its participial forms were *sitten*, *sit*, *sat*, and *sate*. *Sit* and *set* were confused as early as the fourteenth century, and continue to be. A nonstandard form *sot* occurs as preterit and participle of both verbs.

The confusion of *lie-lay-lain* and *lay-laid-laid* is as old as that of *sit* and *set*. The intransitive use of *lay*, according to the OED, “was not app[arently] regarded as a solecism” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It has been so used by some very important writers, including Francis Bacon and Lord Byron—for example, in “There let him lay” (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*). The brothers H. W. and F. G. Fowler (49) cited with apparently delighted disapproval “I suspected him of having laid in wait for the purpose” from the writing of Richard Grant White, the eminent nineteenth-century American purist—for purists love above all to catch other purists in some supposed sin against English grammar. Today the two verbs are so thoroughly confused that their forms are often freely interchanged, as in the following description of a modern dancer, who “lay down again; then raised the upper part of his body once more and stared upstage at the brick wall; then laid down again” (*Illustrated London News*).

*See-saw-seen* has normal development of the Middle English forms of the verb. Some dialects have the alternative preterits *see*, *seed*, and *seen*.

Other surviving Class V verbs have become weak: *bequeath*, *fret*, *knead*, *mete*, *reap*, *scrape*, *weigh*, and *wreak*.

Some verbs from Class VI (including *take*, a Scandinavian loanword that ultimately ousted its Old English synonym *niman* from the language) show regular development:

forsake	forsook	forsaken
shake	shook	shaken
take	took	taken

Early Modern English frequently used the preterit of these verbs as a participle, as in Shakespeare's "Save what is had or must from you be took" (Sonnet 75), "Have from the forests shook three summers' pride" (Sonnet 104), and "Hath she forsooke so many Noble Matches?" (*Othello*). *Stand* (and the compound *understand*) has lost its old participle *standen*; the preterit form *stood* has served as a participle since the sixteenth century, though not exclusively. *Stand* also occurs as a participle, as does a weak form *standed*, as in "a tongue not understood of the people" in the fourteenth Article of Religion of the Anglican Communion. Two verbs of this class have formed their preterits by analogy with Class VII:

slay	slew	slain
draw	drew	drawn

Other surviving verbs of this class have become weak: *fare*, *flay*, *gnaw*, *(en)grave*, *heave*, *lade*, *laugh*, *shave*, *step*, *wade*, and *wash*. But strong participial forms *laden* and *shaven* survive as adjectives, and *heave* has an alternative strong preterit *hove*.

Several verbs of Class VII show regular development:

blow	blew	blown
grow	grew	grown
know	knew	known
throw	threw	thrown

Another, *crow*–*crew*–*crowed*, has a normally developed preterit that is now rare in American use, but it has only a weak participle. Two other verbs also have normal phonological development, although the vowels of their principal parts are different from those above:

fall	fell	fallen
beat	beat	beaten

*Hold*–*held*–*held* has borrowed its Modern English participle from the Middle English preterit. The original participle is preserved in the old-fashioned *beholden*. Modern English *hang*–*hung*–*hung* is a mixture of three Middle English verbs: *hōn* (Class VII), *hagen* (weak), and *hengen* (a Scandinavian loan). The alternative weak preterit and participle, *hanged*, is frequent in reference to capital punishment, though it is by no means universally so used.

*Let*, originally a member of this class, now has unchanged principal parts. Other verbs surviving from the group have become weak; two of them did so as early as Old English times: *dread*, *flow*, *fold*, *hew*, *leap*, *mow*, *read* (OE preterit *rædde*),

*row*, *sleep* (OE preterit *slēpte*), *sow*, *span* ‘join,’ *walk*, *wax* ‘grow,’ and *weep*. Strong participial forms *sown*, *mown*, and *hewn* survive, mainly as adjectives.

ENDINGS FOR PERSON AND NUMBER

The personal endings of early Modern English verbs were somewhat simplified from those of Middle English, with the loss of *-e* as an ending for the first person singular in the present indicative (making that form identical with the infinitive, which had lost its final *-n* and then its *-e*): *I sit* (to *sit*) from Middle English *ich sitte* (to *sitten*). Otherwise, however, the early Modern English verb preserved a number of personal endings that have since disappeared, and it had, especially early in the period, several variants for some of the persons:

	Present	Preterit
I	sit	sat
thou	sittest, sitst	sat, sattest, satst
he, she	sitteth, sits	sat
we, you, they	sit	sat

The early Modern English third person singular varied between *-(e)s* and *-(e)th*. From the beginning of the seventeenth century the *-s* form began to prevail, though for a while the two forms could be used interchangeably, particularly in verse, as in Shakespeare’s “Sometime she driveth ore a Souldiers necke, & then dreames he of cutting Forraine throats” (*Romeo and Juliet*). But *doth* and *bath* lasted until well into the eighteenth century, and the King James Bible uses only *-th* forms. The *-s* forms are due to Northern dialect influence.

Third person plural forms occasionally end in *-s*, also of Northern provenience, as in “Where lo, two lamps, burnt out, in darkness lies” (*Venus and Adonis*). These should not be regarded as “ungrammatical” uses of the singular for the plural form, although analogy with the singular may have played a part in extending the ending *-s* to the plural, as is certainly the case with the first and second persons of naive raconteurs—“I says” and “says I”—and of the rude expression of disbelief “Sez you!”

The early Modern English preterit ending for the second person singular, *-(e)st*, began to be lost in the sixteenth century. Thus the preterit tense became invariable, as it is today, except for the verb *be*.

The verb *be*, always the most irregular of English verbs, had the following personal inflections in the early Modern period:

	Present	Preterit
I	am	was
thou	art	were, wast, werst, wert
he, she	is	was
we, you, they	are, be	were

The plural *be* was widely current as late as the seventeenth century; Eilert Ekwall (*History of Modern English Sounds and Morphology* 118) cites “the powers

that be” as a survival of it. The preterit second person singular was *were* until the sixteenth century, when the forms *wast*, *werst*, and *wert* began to occur, the last remaining current in literature throughout the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century poets were also very fond of it (“Bird thou never wert”); it gave a certain archaically spiritual tone to their writing that they presumably considered desirable. *Wast* and *wert* are by analogy with present-tense *art*. In *werst*, the *s* of *wast* has apparently been extended. The locution *you was* is covered earlier (167–8).

Of the other highly irregular verbs, little need be said. *Could*, the preterit of *can*, acquired its unetymological *l* in the sixteenth century by analogy with *would* and *should*. Early Modern English forms that differed from those now current are *durst* (surviving only in dialect use) as preterit of *dare*, which otherwise had become weak; *mought*, a variant of *might*; and *mowe*, an occasional present plural form of *may*. *Will* had early variants *wull* and *woll*.

### CONTRACTED FORMS

Most of our verbs with contracted *-n’t* first occur in writing in the seventeenth century. It is likely that all were spoken long before ever getting written down, for **contractions** are in their very nature colloquial and thus are infrequent in writing. *Won’t* is from *wol(l) not*. *Don’t* presents several problems. One would expect the pronunciation [dunt] from *do* [du] plus the contracted [nt] for *not*. Jespersen (1909–49, 5:431) suggests that the [o] of *don’t* is analogical with that of *won’t*. Whatever the origin of [o] in *don’t*, the *OED* records third person *don’t* in 1670, but *doesn’t* not until 1818. It appears that *it don’t* is not a “corruption” of *it doesn’t*, but the older form. The *OED* derives third person *don’t* from *he (she, it) do*, and it cites instances of the latter from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including Pepys’s “Sir Arthur Haselrigge do not yet appear in the House” (March 2, 1660).

*An’t* [ænt] for *am (are, is) not* is apparently of late seventeenth-century origin; the variant *ain’t* occurs about a century later. With the eighteenth-century British English shifting of [æ] to [a] as in *ask*, *path*, *dance*, and the like, the pronunciation of *an’t* shifted to [ant]. At the same time, preconsonantal [r] was lost, thus making *an’t* and *aren’t* homophones. As a result, the two words were confused, even by those, including most Americans, who pronounce *r* before a consonant. *Aren’t I?* (originally a mistake for *an’t I?* ‘am I not?’) has gained ground among those who regard *ain’t* as a linguistic mortal sin. Although *ain’t* has fallen victim to a series of schoolteachers’ crusades, Henry Alford (1810–71), dean of Canterbury, testified that in his day “It ain’t certain” and “I ain’t going” were “very frequently used, even by highly educated persons,” and Frederick James Furnivall (1825–1910), an early editor of the *OED* and founder of the Chaucer Society and the Early English Text Society, is said to have used the form *ain’t* habitually (Jespersen 1909–49, 5:434). Despite its current reputation as a shibboleth of uneducated speech, *ain’t* is still used by many cultivated speakers in informal circumstances.

Contractions of auxiliary verbs without *not* occur somewhat earlier than forms with *-n’t*, though they must be about equally old. *It’s* as a written form is from the seventeenth century and ultimately drove out *’tis*, in which the pronoun rather than the verb is reduced. There is no current contraction of *it was* to replace older *’twas*,

and, in the light of the practical disappearance of the subjunctive, it is not surprising that there is none for *it were*.

*It'll* has replaced older *'twill*; *will* similarly is contracted after other pronouns and, in speech, after other words as well. In older times *'ll*, usually written *le* (as in *Ile, youle*), occurred only after vowels and was hence not syllabic, as it must be after consonants. *Would* is contracted as early as the late sixteenth century as *'ld*, later becoming *'d*, which came in the eighteenth century to be used for *had* also.

The contraction of *have* written *'ve* likewise seems to have occurred first in the eighteenth century. After a consonant, this contraction is identical in pronunciation with unstressed *of* (compare “the wood of the tree” and “He would’ve done it”), hence such uneducated spellings as *would of* and *should of* frequently are written in literary **eye dialect** to indicate that the speaker is unschooled. (The point seems to be “This is the way the speaker would write *have* if obliged to do so.”) As indicative of pronunciation the spelling is pointless.

## EXPANDED VERB FORMS

Progressive verb forms, consisting of a form of *be* plus a present participle (“I am working”), occur occasionally in Old English but are rare before the fifteenth century and remain relatively infrequent until the seventeenth. The progressive passive, as in “He is being punished,” does not occur until the later part of the eighteenth century. Pepys, for instance, writes “to Hales’s the painter, thinking to have found Harris sitting there for his picture, which is drawing for me” (April 26, 1668), where we would use *is being drawn*.

In early Modern English, verbs of motion or becoming frequently use *be* instead of *have* in their perfect forms: “is risen,” “are entered in the Roman territories,” “were safe arrived,” “is turned white.”

*Do* is frequently used as a verbal auxiliary, though it is used somewhat differently from the way it is used today—for example, “I do wonder, his insolence can brooke to be commanded” (*Coriolanus*) and “The Serpent that did sting thy Fathers life / Now weares his Crowne” (*Hamlet*), where current English would not use it at all. Compare with these instances “A Nun of winters sisterhood kisses not more religiouslie” (*As You Like It*), where we would say *does not kiss*, and “What say the citizens?” (*Richard III*), where we would use *do the citizens say*. In present-day English, when there is no other auxiliary, *do* is obligatory in negative statements, in questions, and in emphatic contradictions (“Despite the weather report, it did rain”). In early Modern English, however, *do* was optional in any sentence that had no other auxiliary. Thus one finds all constructions both with and without it: *He fell* or *He did fall*, *Forbid them not* or *Do not forbid them*, *Comes he?* or *Does he come?*

In Old and Middle English times *shall* and *will* were sometimes used to express simple futurity, though as a rule they implied, respectively, obligation and volition. The present-day distinction prescribed for these words was first codified by John Wallis, an eminent professor of geometry at Oxford who wrote a grammar of the English language in Latin (*Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, 1653). His rule was that, to express a future event without emotional overtones, one should say *I* or



*we shall*, but *you, he, she*, or *they will*; conversely, for emphasis, willfulness, or insistence, one should say *I or we will*, but *you, he, she*, or *they shall*. This rule has never been ubiquitous in the English-speaking world. Despite a crusade of more than three centuries to promote the rule, the distinction it prescribes is still largely a mystery to most Americans, who get along very well in expressing futurity and willfulness without it.

## OTHER VERBAL CONSTRUCTIONS

**Impersonal and reflexive constructions** were fairly frequent in early Modern English and were even more so in Middle English. Shakespeare used, for instance, the impersonal constructions “it dislikes [displeases] me,” “methinks,” “it yearns [grieves] me” and the reflexives “I complain me,” “how dost thou feel thyself now?” “I doubt me,” “I repent me,” and “give me leave to retire myself.”

Some now intransitive verbs were used transitively, as in “despair [of] thy charm,” “give me leave to speak [of] him,” and “Smile you [at] my speeches.”

## PREPOSITIONS

With the Middle English loss of all distinctive inflectional endings for the noun except genitive and plural *-s*, prepositions acquired a somewhat greater importance than they had had in Old English. Their number consequently increased during the late Middle and early Modern periods. Changes in the uses of certain prepositions are illustrated by the practice of Shakespeare: “And what delight shall she have to looke on [at] the divell?” (*Othello*); “He came of [on] an errand to mee” (*Merry Wives*); “But thou wilt be aveng’d on [for] my misdeeds” (*Richard III*); “’Twas from [against] the Cannon [canon]” (*Coriolanus*); “We are such stuffe / As dreames are made on [of]” (*Tempest*); “Then speake the truth by [of] her” (*Two Gentlemen*); “... that our armies joyn not in [on] a hot day” (*2 Henry IV*).

Even in Old English times, *on* was sometimes reduced in compound words like *abūtan* (now *about*), a variant of *on būtan* ‘on the outside of.’ The reduced form appears in early Modern English *aboard*, *afield*, *abed*, and *asleep*, and with verbal nouns in *-ing* (*a-hunting*, *a-bleeding*, *a-praying*). The *a* of “twice a day” and other such expressions has the same origin. *In* was sometimes contracted to *i*, as in Shakespeare’s “i’ the head,” “i’ God’s name,” and so forth. This particular contraction was much later fondly affected by Robert Browning, who doubtless thought it singularly archaic—for example, “would not sink i’ the scale” and “This rage was right i’ the main” (“Rabbi Ben Ezra”).

## EARLY MODERN ENGLISH FURTHER ILLUSTRATED

The following passages are from the King James Bible, published in 1611. They are the opening verses from chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). The punctuation and spelling of the original have been retained, but a present-day type face has been used.

## I. GENESIS 1.1–5.

1. In the beginning God created the Heaven, and the Earth. 2. And the earth was without forme, and voyd, and darkenesse was vpon the face of the deepe: and the Spirit of God mooued vpon the face of the waters. 3. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. 4. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God diuided the light from the darkenesse. 5. And God called the light, Day, and the darknesse he called Night: and the euening and the morning were the first day.

## II. GENESIS 2.1–3.

1. Thus the heauens and the earth were finished, and all the hoste of them. 2. And on the seuenth day God ended his worke, which hee had made: And he rested on the seuenth day from all his worke, which he had made. 3. And God blessed the seuenth day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his worke, which God created and made.

## III. LUKE 15.11–17, 20–24.

11. A certaine man had two sonnes: 12. And the yonger of them said to his father, Father, giue me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he diuided vnto them his liuing. 13. And not many dayes after, the yonger sonne gathered al together, and tooke his iourney into a farre countrey, and there wasted his substance with riotous liuing. 14. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he beganne to be in want. 15. And he went and ioyned himselfe to a citizen of that countrey, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16. And he would faine haue filled his belly with the huskes that the swine did eate: and no man gaue vnto him. 17. And when he came to himselfe, he said, How many hired seruants of my fathers haue bread inough and to spare and I perish with hunger.... 20. And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ranne, and fell on his necke, and kissed him. 21. And the sonne said vnto him, Father, I have sinned against heauen, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy sonne. 22. But the father saide to his seruants, Bring foorth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shooes on his feete. 23. And bring hither the fatted calfe, and kill it, and let us eate and be merrie. 24. For this my sonne was dead, and is aliue againe; hee was lost, and is found.

## FOR FURTHER READING

See the list in Chapter 7.